

**PROPOSED IDENTIFICATION AND
DESCRIPTION OF
SOCRATES' METHOD OF EXAMINATION**

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Provisional Identification and Description of Socrates' Method of Examination

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Abstract

Socrates' first mission to understand the riddle of the Oracle led him to a definition of wisdom. His second method was to help others discover this wisdom and from this discover how to live the good life. Plato portrays Socrates in the Earlier *Dialogs* using the *elenchus* to fulfil this mission. This form of argument has been described by Socratic scholars, but contradictions between it and statements made by Socrates of what he did indicate it may not be the method he used. Socrates may not have used the *elenchus*, but he did do something and what it was can be identified from his statements; providing these are accepted as reliable.

The method proposed indicates that Socrates rationally examined life by asking people why they take certain actions. Their answers were either in terms of the expected results, or general statements of what a person should do. Socrates appears to have examined the first type of answer directly by a cross-examination of the person's opinions of what the consequences will be. He appears to have examined the second type of answer by examining examples based on the general statement. The first type of examination will indicate whether it is wise to take a particular action or not. The second type of examination will only indicate whether the aim of the action is worthwhile.

The evidence suggests that Socrates had a pragmatic method of examining life which indicates which actions are most likely to bring the best results and therefore the best life. The wise person will use the method to examine their life, and then act in accordance with what they discover.

Section 1: Introduction

Socratic Studies

The relatively new field of Socratic studies, as distinct from Platonic studies, seeks to identify and describe the method and philosophy of the historical Socrates. To do this, it is focused on discerning where the line can be drawn between this Socrates and the one Plato used as a mouthpiece for his own ideas in the *Dialogs*.

This field appears to have emerged from the publication of two books in the early 1950's: *Plato's Early Dialectic* by Richard Robinson¹, and an introduction by Gregory

¹ Robinson, R. (1953) *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*. 2nd Ed. Oxford University Press. London.

Vlastos² in a translation of *Plato's Protagoras*³. Both books were attempts to identify clearly the method and doctrine of the historical Socrates. Until the appearance of these two books, this had been glossed over as scholars seemed more intent on examining Plato's ideas and methods of argument. Subsequent authors disagreed with various parts of both books, but it was these "mistakes" that focused scholars on exactly what Socrates did say and do. From this, the field has grown and developed.

One of the questions Socratic studies is concerned with is "Who are you talking about - Socrates or a 'Socrates' in Plato? If you do mean the former, you must argue for it. You must give reasons for the claim that through a 'Socrates' in Plato we can come to know the Socrates of history."⁴ It is this Socrates of history and how he can be distinguished from the 'Socrates' in Plato that is the focus of Socratic scholars; it is the method of this Socrates that is the focus of this thesis.

Socrates in the Earlier *Dialogs*

The first problem in identifying this method is to establish whether there was an actual historical Socrates. I will cover this in more detail below, but briefly, the evidence suggests there was.

Most, although not all, of the information about Socrates comes from his student Plato in his *Dialogs*. These have been divided by a number of methods into three periods: the Earlier, Middle, and Later *Dialogs*,⁵ and the division is generally accepted. There is disagreement over the facts of Socrates' life, but most authors agree that the historical Socrates, as opposed to a 'Socrates' in Plato, can be found in the fifteen Earlier *Dialogs*. Ten Earlier *Dialogs* "are generally described as Socratic (or Elenctic), and they probably keep pretty close to the spirit and method of Socrates."⁶ The other five are Transition *Dialogs*.⁷ There is some disagreement about this sub-division as well as the

² The Apparent leader in the field, until his death in 1991, based on the amount of work published and the number of times he is cited in other works. In almost all Socratic work published in the past twenty years, the authors refer back to something Vlastos has written.

³ Vlastos, G. (1956) *Plato's Protagoras*; B. Jowett's translation revised by M. Ostwald, edited with Introduction by G. Vlastos.

⁴ Vlastos, G. (1991) *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cornell University Press. New York. p. 45

⁵ Brandwood, L. (1990) *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

⁶ Field, G.C. in Woodhead, W.D. (1953) *Plato: Socratic Dialogs*. Nelson. London. P. viii

⁷ Vlastos, G. (1991) p. 47, and Santas, G.X. (1979) *Socrates: The Arguments of the Philosophers*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.

chronological order of the *Dialogs* within the divisions,⁸ but these do not effect the purpose of this thesis.

Xenophon, another student of Socrates, also wrote about his teacher. The style is not as dramatic nor as engaging as Plato's, nor are the ideas as fully developed, but it gives another perspective. Aristotle mentions Socrates in his *Metaphysics*, probably repeating what his teacher Plato had told him

The historical facts given about Socrates and his life by Plato and Xenophon are accepted as being mostly correct. There are some areas of disagreement, but they do not alter the overall picture. A later biography of Socrates by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*⁹ differs from earlier writers in several places; for example, whether Socrates had one or two wives. Diogenes Laertius had access to a number of sources no longer extant and so this adds to the difficulty. In the cases where he is obviously wrong, such as the mention that Socrates may have been a slave, it is better to rely on the writings of those who knew Socrates personally.

Most authors either present the historical facts that seem consistent without comment¹⁰ or briefly note the question of "historical reliability" and move on.¹¹ I am doing the latter, and will briefly introduce the historical Socrates below. However, there has also been a fringe who believe:

'Socrates' to be a mere literary creation by a group of writers at the beginning of the fourth century, the real man, if there ever was one, being lost in the mists of time. However, the "myth" theory is now generally rejected, at least in its extremest forms. The evidence, inadequate though it is, is too widespread to allow such an agnosticism ...¹²

Socrates' Mission in Life

At his trial, Socrates stated that he discovered his mission in life after his friend Chaerepho travelled to the Oracle at Delphi and asked if there was any man wiser than

⁸ Vlastos, G. (1991)

⁹ Diogenes Laertius. *The Lives Of Eminent Philosophers* (1925) The Loeb Classical Library. William Heinemann Ltd. London.

¹⁰ Zeller, E. (1883) *Outlines of Greek Philosophy*. Kegan Paul. London. [13th Edition 1931, p. 97]

¹¹ Saunders, T.J. Ed. (1987) *Plato: Early Socratic Dialogs*. Penguin Books. Middlesex. p. 16

¹² Lacey, A.R. *Our Knowledge of Socrates*, in Vlastos, G. (1971) *The Philosophy of Socrates*. Anchor Books. New York. p. 24

Socrates. “And the Pythian priestess replied there was none.”¹³ This was a puzzle to Socrates. He said he was aware he knew only one thing; that he knew nothing, which he appears to have concluded after many years of self-examination.

However, the god would not lie, and so Socrates saw as his first mission the understanding of this riddle. To do this he began testing himself, who knew nothing, as well as others who had a reputation for wisdom. In all cases, he examined them and pointed out that although they thought they knew something, in fact they knew nothing. This was one of the causes of the animosity towards him, so he says.¹⁴

He eventually came to the conclusion that the Oracle was correct. He was the wisest, but only by virtue of the fact that he knew that he knew nothing while others knew nothing, but thought they knew something. He then decided the Oracle did not mean that only Socrates was the wisest, but that all those who like Socrates were aware that they knew nothing could be called wise.

Having solved the riddle, Socrates believed his new mission was to help people discover and accept that they know nothing and therefore become wise. Socrates felt that fulfilling “the philosopher’s mission of searching into myself and other men,”¹⁵ was given to him by the gods. To achieve this mission he went about “persuading ... all, young and old alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul.”¹⁶ He believed he was “that gadfly which god has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you (to examine yourselves).”¹⁷ Plato does not say when Chaerepho travelled to Delphi, but from then on Socrates spent all his time and energy fulfilling this mission and was still doing so when he was charged and tried at seventy.

The wisdom Socrates examined was not knowledge of particular crafts, or of information learned in school or from books. People who had this type of knowledge

¹³ *Ap.* 21a

¹⁴ *Ap.* 22e

¹⁵ *Ap.* 28e

¹⁶ *Ap.* 30a

¹⁷ *Ap.* 30e

were tested and yet still found wanting in wisdom. It was a different type of wisdom and it will be discussed below.

“Socrates” Method - The *Elenchus*

In 1883, Zeller mentions a “remarkable method of examination, the so-called dialectic¹⁸ process to which (Socrates) subjected the people with whom he came into contact.”¹⁹ This method had a deep effect that could not have “been attained by merely instructing them in the definition of ideas.”²⁰ Socrates did what he did by asking questions. The method, called the *elenchus*, was mentioned in other books of the same period, but not before Grote,²¹ according to Vlastos.²² Both Grote and Campbell,²³ another nineteenth century author, mention the *elenchus*, or “Socratic *Elenchus* or cross-examination,” by name.

“Unlike Zeller, Grote saw with the utmost clarity how central was the *elenchus* to Socratic enquiry.”²⁴ None of the texts, however, gives enough information about the method for a person to be able to use it for their own examination. As mentioned, the main focus at that time was on a presentation of the ideas, especially the “more developed” ideas of Plato.

Robinson

The first complete modern description of what was considered Socrates’ method, the *elenchus*, was by Robinson in 1941.²⁵ Robinson defines the *elenchus* as an argument form based on refutation. “*Elenchus* in the wider sense means examining a person with regard to a statement he has made” about a particular moral belief. Questions are put to him that call “for further statements, in the hope that they will determine the meaning and the truth-value of his first statement.”²⁶

¹⁸ Meaning question and answer, not the later dialectic method of synthesis of thesis and antithesis.

¹⁹ Zeller, E. (1883) p. 100

²⁰ Zeller, E. (1883) p. 101

²¹ Grote, G. (1865) *Plato and the Other Companions of Socrates*. John Murray. London.

²² Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 28

²³ Campbell, L. (1867) *The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato*. Macmillan and Co. Oxford.

²⁴ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 45

²⁵ Only 500 copies of the 1st edition were published in 1941, the book was not widely available until the 2nd edition Appeared in 1953.

²⁶ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 7

It appears in the *Dialogs* that “most often the truth-value expected is falsehood; and so *elenchus* in the narrower sense is a form of cross-examination or refutation.”²⁷ Although the word *elenchus* has been used to describe all instances of Socrates’ method of investigation in the Earlier *Dialogs*, it only appears half way through *Phaedo*, a Middle *Dialog*. Furthermore, the actual Greek word, *elenchein*, was not a noun that could be used to define a type of argument, but a verb that named what was being done; to refute, to examine critically, to censure.²⁸

Robinson described the *elenchus* as a philosophical examination of the truth-value of “primary propositions” put forward in answer to the question “What is X?” where X is most often a virtue, for example, piety or justice.²⁹ Secondary premises are added to this primary proposition and in most cases it is refuted by the premises either becoming nonsense, or the opposite of the primary proposition. One example of a nonsense premise is that friends are friends of their enemies, but not of their friends.³⁰

The elenctic form of argument can show the primary proposition to be false, but it cannot prove it to be true. The argument may continue to be true as far as the examination is taken, but there is always the chance that the next premise will prove it false. For this reason, the *elenchus* can be continued for any length of time. It does not “directly give a man any positive knowledge, but it gives him for the first time the idea of real knowledge.”³¹

According to Robinson, the “art of the *elenchus* is to find premises believed by the answerer and yet entailing the contrary of the thesis.”³² He allowed for the opposite of the primary proposition to be used as a secondary premise. “The whole essence of the *elenchus* lies in making visible to the answerer the link between certain of his actual beliefs and the contradict(ions) of his present thesis.”³³ The propositions most often examined were definitions of virtues. This is in accord with Socrates’ apparent belief

²⁷ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 7

²⁸ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 28

²⁹ Saunders, T.J. Ed. (1987) p. 29

³⁰ Plato. *Lysis*

³¹ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 17

³² Robinson, R. (1953) p. 15

³³ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 16

“that you cannot really be virtuous unless you have a philosophical understanding of the definition of virtue.”³⁴

The primary aim of the *elenchus* was to refute the ideas or propositions of the person being questioned. From this the person is meant to discover that he does not know what he believed he did. This is Socrates’ definition of wisdom,³⁵ and by the use of the *elenchus*, he hoped to bring about this and the moral improvement of his fellows.³⁶

Robinson identified from statements made by Socrates in the *Dialogs* several conditions for participation. These are presented below. The use of these statements is important because it gives a method for discovering what Socrates actually did. Recent writers have followed Robinson’s lead in using these types of statements to either support or disprove certain aspects of the *elenchus*.

Robinson did not have a high opinion of the *elenchus*, and seems to have preferred later forms of argument in the *Dialogs*, such as dialectic. One of the reasons he considered the *elenchus* “negative” was because it does not positively determine which propositions are true, only which are false. Another reason was the reaction it caused in the people who were subjected to it:

The picture ... of the Socratic *elenchus* is by no means a favourable one. This *elenchus* involved persistent hypocrisy; it showed a negative and destructive spirit; it causes pain to its victims; it thereby made them enemies of Socrates; it thereby brought him to trial, according to his own admission ... for what end was it worth while to be so destructive and insincere, and to incur so much enmity?³⁷

However, Socrates clearly felt that his mission was important enough to die for³⁸ and perhaps this may have been how he justified the use of a method that had certain negative aspects, if in fact it did.

Robinson raised several objections to the *elenchus*. “The following objection may be made to the method of *elenchus*: it only tells you that you are wrong, and does not also

³⁴ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 14

³⁵ *Ap.* 23b

³⁶ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 14

³⁷ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 10

³⁸ *Ap.* 29d

tell you why.”³⁹ He also believed that Socrates’ statements of not knowing where the *elenchus* was going were ironic and sly.⁴⁰ “It may be urged that the *elenchus* would be more successful without the irony. The insincerity of pretending not to be conducting an *elenchus* must surely lessen the moral effect. It is not possible to make men good by a kind of behavior that is not itself good.”⁴¹ Overall, Robinson felt that the Socratic *elenchus* was a most unsuitable instrument for moral education. It consisted of logic-chopping, it could not be followed by most people, it “does not command respect, and at best improves only the agility of the mind while leaving the character untouched.”⁴²

The value of Robinson’s work is that it raises the question of the method Socrates used. What is interesting is that it was published only fifty years ago. This appears to indicate the intellectual attraction of the more developed philosophy of Plato in the Middle and Later *Dialogs* and how it seemed to push Socrates with his more practical focus on examining how to live into the background.

Vlastos

Next to publish was Vlastos (1956) with a further explanation of the *elenchus*.⁴³ Like many other Platonic scholars at the time, he probably had a good idea of what Socrates did, but focused on other areas. From the titles of his early publications, he appears to have been focusing on the philosophy and not the method in the *Dialogs*. However, Robinson had said that Socrates’ method was of a certain type, and this caused scholars to reflect on whether this was true. Vlastos was one of the first to respond.

Vlastos agreed with Robinson on several points. He agreed that Socrates had conclusions and a method for getting them.

Socrates the *teacher* now appears as the man who has not just certain conclusions to impart to others, but a *method of investigation* - the method by which he reached these results in the first place, and which is even more important than the results, for it is the means of testing, revising, and going beyond them.⁴⁴

³⁹ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 17

⁴⁰ Cf. “His usual slyness.” *Rep. I.* 337a

⁴¹ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 18

⁴² Robinson, R. (1953) p. 14

⁴³ Vlastos, G. (1956)

⁴⁴ Vlastos, G. (1971) p. 12

This method was the *elenchus*. He agreed with Robinson that Socrates imposed certain conditions for participation in the investigation and followed Robinson's terminology.⁴⁵ However, he put forward a different description and analysis of the *elenchus*.⁴⁶ This he later changed; "I guessed wrongly twenty five years ago in the account of the *elenchus* ... and so have others before and after."⁴⁷

Vlastos agreed with Robinson that the main focus of the *elenchus* was on examining the truth-value of propositions, and that from this examination came benefits to the lives of those being questioned. Vlastos states that the *elenchus* is a search for true beliefs:

Socrates could infer with certainty that any set of moral beliefs which was internally consistent would consist exclusively of true beliefs; for if it contained even a single false belief, then ... it would contain beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief. ... for years he has been striving for just this, constantly exposing the consistency of his beliefs to elenctic challenge, ready to root out any belief, however attractive in itself, which if allowed to stand would disturb the coherence of the system as a whole.⁴⁸

From this focus on beliefs and the search for a consistent set of moral beliefs were meant to come the practical benefits, presumably knowledge of which actions to take and which not to. Socrates stated mission was the examination of life, and the *elenchus* is apparently meant to focus on this by examining the propositions it is based on, but this appears to be an indirect examination of propositions and not a direct examination of life itself. This apparent contradiction has been explained away in a number of ways.

The *elenchus* has a double objective: to discover how every human being ought to live *and* to test that single human being that is doing the answering - to find out if he is living as one ought to live. This is a two-in-one operation. Socrates does not provide for two types of *elenchus* - a philosophical one, searching for truth about the good life, and a therapeutic one, searching out the answerer's own life in the hope of bringing him to the truth. There is one *elenchus* and it must do both jobs.⁴⁹

The way it is meant to do these jobs is to look for consistency. The *elenchus* can indicate contradictions that we carry and from discovering these, we can attempt to

⁴⁵ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 39

⁴⁶ He later withdrew certain statements that had caused a great deal of debate, see Vlastos, G. (1991) Ch. 1

⁴⁷ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 28

⁴⁸ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 54

make our actions match our beliefs. We can recognize and remove the contradictions from our lives and begin to live well.

Vlastos disagreed with Robinson over the nature of the secondary premises that could be added to the primary proposition.

A third mistake is the notion that the consequence which contradicts the thesis is drawn from that thesis, that is, deduced from it. The notion is an invention of Richard Robinson. In his *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* Robinson had maintained that Plato 'habitually thought and wrote as if all *elenchus* consists in reducing the thesis to a self contradiction.'⁵⁰

This disagreement over whether the opposite of the primary proposition put forward at the start of *elenchus* can be used as the first secondary premise is important. If it can, then the *elenchus* becomes a testing of propositions instead of a pragmatic investigation into the wisdom of taking certain actions.

Vlastos, in a later article, also wondered whether any positive results could arise from a method that was clearly negative (in Robinson's sense). "If (proving the thesis to be false) were all Socrates had expected of the *elenchus* - exposure of inconsistencies in his interlocutors - where did he find positive support for those strong doctrines of his on whose truth he based his life?"⁵¹

Vlastos represented the mainstream from the mid-50's until the mid-80's. This mainstream agreed, and many still do, that the historical Socrates had a method of investigation, that it was based on the *elenchus*, that he imposed certain 'conditions for participation,' and that it had some 'negative' as well as positive aspects. It was not until the mid-80's that dissenting opinions began to appear.⁵²

⁴⁹ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 37

⁵⁰ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 29

⁵¹ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 46

⁵² E.g. Seeskin, K. (1987) *Dialog and Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method*. State University of New York Press. Albany.

A Brief Description of The *Elenchus*

Before moving on to the dissenting opinions, it seems to be a good idea to present a brief and simplified description of the *elenchus*, and the overall method of investigation that it appears to be part of.

Many examples of the *elenchus* in the Earlier *Dialogs* begin with Socrates meeting with someone who is considering an action. The usual line of reasoning is that if the action is virtuous, it would be worth taking, by definition, because it would lead to good results.

Then it is virtue which makes us good?

And if good, then advantageous. All good things are advantageous, are they not?

So virtue itself must be something advantageous.⁵³

The action should therefore be checked to see if it is virtuous. To do this the person being questioned is asked to state which virtue it is based on. The reasoning is; if he can define the virtue, and if this definition can apply to all instances of the virtue, then the person must know what the virtue is and the proposed action, being based on this definition, will presumably be an instance of the virtue. Hopefully from this the person will be convinced of the benefits of investigating the proposed action.

The next step is to come up with a satisfactory definition of the virtue. This is the answer to the question "What is X?" To do this the person should consider all examples of the virtue and try to come up with a definition that covers what is common to them all. This was not always easy and so Socrates often gave an example, such as in *Meno*⁵⁴ and *Euthyphro*.⁵⁵ Eventually a statement that is sufficiently broad is arrived at which is a definition and not a description.

The truth-value of this definition needs to be tested. To do this, the *elenchus* is used. It entails adding premises to the definition and coming to some sort of conclusion. In some examples in the *Dialogs*, the interlocutor gives the premises, but more often Socrates puts them forward and only asks for assent. "Step by step the interlocutor is led on, till he finds himself assenting to some apparently unavoidable conclusion from the

⁵³ *Me.* 87d

⁵⁴ In response to *Meno's* descriptions of examples of virtue. *Me.* 72b

⁵⁵ In response to *Euthyphro's* answer to "What is piety?" *Eu.* 5d

secondary premises, which is nevertheless at odds with the primary proposition.”⁵⁶ This conclusion may be a contradiction of the primary proposition, a nonsense, or a non-contradiction. Sooner or later, the interlocutor finds that he cannot have both the primary proposition and the secondary premises. In theory he could reject the secondary premises, but since they sound so obviously true, in practice it is the primary proposition that has to be abandoned.

If the primary proposition is discovered to be false, and it usually is, after some bewilderment the interlocutor may try again. He offers either a new primary proposition, or the first primary proposition modified in light of the results of Socrates’ interrogation. If he cannot come up with a better definition of the virtue, presumably a different action should be taken, one that is based on a true definition of a virtue.

An important point in this description of the investigation is in the first step. Socrates asks what virtue the proposed action is an example of. The person being questioned has to state one of the virtues and whichever one is chosen is usually accepted as a starting proposition. There are other questions Socrates could have asked at this step, and the evidence is that in fact he did. What is asked at this point will determine the nature of the investigation.

Seeskin

It appears that once the *elenchus* became well described certain writers began to see contradictions between the method and what Socrates says he does. This has led to a new set of ideas on both the *elenchus* and the method of the historical Socrates.

Seeskin (1987) agreed with previous authors that the *elenchus* was the method in Plato’s Earlier *Dialogs*, that it was used by Socrates, that it had a number of rules, that it examined the truth-value of propositions, and that it had certain benefits. He also notes that the *elenchus* can be a long process, the investigation should be carried to the “point where nothing has to be taken back,”⁵⁷ and this could mean a lifetime endeavor.

⁵⁶ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 12

⁵⁷ Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 33

Besides the problem of the length of the investigation, Seeskin raises some points that question the effectiveness of the *elenchus*. The person is looking for certainty, but there “can only be certainty after a long time.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, this certainty may not indicate the truth of the primary proposition, only a consistency between opinions that are given as premises, “but this could be consistently wrong.”⁵⁹ The problem of how a true definition can be secured remains.

Seeskin also questioned whether the *elenchus* can be considered a ‘method.’ If method means “a series of procedures which can be taken up by any reasonably intelligent person and followed to a successful conclusion, then I submit Socrates was opposed to method.”⁶⁰

Elenchus is often called a *method* by Platonic scholars, and in one respect, it is. We have seen that there are rules that dictate what the participants in the inquiry can and cannot do ... but these rules do not constitute a *method* as that term is used by subsequent philosophers.⁶¹

Socrates did not conceive of method as a contemporary philosopher would. If an account of method is supposed to be a series of procedures which can be taken up by any reasonably intelligent person and followed to a successful conclusion, then, I submit Socrates was opposed to method.⁶²

Seeskin is arguing that, at most, the *elenchus* can only be considered a ‘way’ or ‘approach’ that people can follow to examine their lives for the practical purpose of living better ones.

However, like other writers, in calling what Socrates did in the Earlier *Dialogs* ‘*elenchus*,’ Seeskin has taken a description and definition from a later *Dialog* and used it to name earlier ‘arguments.’ Seeskin (and Vlastos) pointed out that the first actual discussion of the method in the *Dialogs* is in the middle of *Phaedo*, a Middle *Dialog*, and that it had, by this time, become a method that used a number of philosophical concepts:

⁵⁸ Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 43

⁵⁹ Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 35

⁶⁰ Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 41

⁶¹ Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 37

⁶² Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 41

In (*Phaedo* 99d - 101e) Socrates claims that his procedure consists in putting down the hypothesis he considers to be the strongest and determining what is and is not in accord with it. What is in accord he regards as true, and what is not he regards as false.⁶³

This is not the case in the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Euthyphro*. These *Dialogs* do not present a clear picture of the *elenchus* as it is defined in *Phaedo*. In these early *Dialogs*, what Socrates did is presented as a more pragmatic investigation into the lives of people, not into hypotheses. It seems that a later description has influenced the way earlier examples are considered.

Seeskin raises several points from the contradictions he has referred to that differ from the mainstream represented by Vlastos and his ideas. These are the questions of whether the *elenchus* can be considered a philosophical method, or a method at all, whether the early *Dialogs* are in fact examples of the *elenchus*, and whether the method can be effectively used to achieve true definitions, and not just indicate inconsistency.

Brickhouse and Smith

Brickhouse and Smith⁶⁴ agreed with previous writers that the Earlier *Dialogs* portray Socrates using the *elenchus*, that the *elenchus* is a method, that it has rules, and that it aims at examining the truth-value of propositions. They also claim several benefits for the *elenchus*; self knowledge, establishing generally applicable moral truths, and testing definitions. However, they differ with the mainstream on two major points; that Socrates considered himself to have used a method, and that Socrates used the *elenchus*. The support for their opinions comes from comparing the descriptions of the *elenchus* with what Socrates said he did.

Did Socrates consider he had a method?

It is no doubt tempting to think that Socrates must have self-consciously employed a method, because his questioning or examining others seems so invariably to lead to the same result: his interlocutors are revealed to have contradictory beliefs, whereby the interlocutor's claim or hypothesis is shown to conflict with one or more of the interlocutor's later admissions. How would Socrates characterize his

⁶³ Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 38

ability to do this so dependably? Would he say that his ability to reduce his interlocutors to perplexity was comparable to a cobbler's ability to make good shoes, or some other craftsman's ability to practice his craft and product his craft's product? In short, is Socrates ability to refute others a craft?

The early dialogs are consistent in treating all knowledge as if it were craft-knowledge and in regarding virtue as if it were a kind of craft whose goal is the production of a good life.⁶⁵

Virtue, then, is analogous to the crafts in the sense that, just as they have functions whose success or failure is measurable, so too the proper definition of a virtue will enable one to measure one's own or others' actions; ... Herein lies the first Socratic paradox, 'Virtue is knowledge,' which means that virtue is craft-knowledge.⁶⁶

According to Brickhouse and Smith, Socrates did not clearly define "what conditions must be met for something to qualify as a craft."⁶⁷ However, from gathering various references to crafts scattered throughout the *Dialogs*, these conditions can be pieced together. Brickhouse and Smith have identified seven criteria for craft knowledge:

1. Rationality/regularity: the craftsman going about his business in an orderly, purposive, and rational way. The results of his craft are regular and orderly.
2. Teachability/learnability: for something to be a craft it must be teachable and it must be learnable.
3. Explicability: the craft-expert can explain or give an account of that about which he is an expert.
4. Inerrancy: the craft-expert does not err in his work or in his judgements about the subject matter of his expertise.
5. Uniqueness: the craftsman is a specialist whose special abilities are unique to him and other craftsmen who specialize in that craft.
6. Distinctness of subject matter: each craft has a distinct subject matter.
7. Knowledge/wisdom: the craftsman knows his subject matter.⁶⁸

Statements made by Socrates of what it was he did do not satisfy these criteria. For example, he said there was not a regular product,⁶⁹ what he did was not unique,⁷⁰ and

⁶⁴ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) *Plato's Socrates*. Oxford University Press. New York.

⁶⁵ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 5

⁶⁶ Saunders, T.J. Ed. (1987) p. 267

⁶⁷ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 6

experience was not needed.⁷¹ From his belief that he had no knowledge, he must have concluded that he had nothing to teach. And because he was not teaching, he did not have a method. “Whatever Socrates did, we can all do it, without skill, experience, talent, gift or craft. It follows from these considerations that Socrates thinks there is no method.”⁷² This disagrees with Vlastos’s descriptions⁷³ of what Socrates did. These meet the conditions for a craft, but Socrates’ own descriptions of what he did fail to do so.

The second major disagreement is whether Socrates used the *elenchus*. The aim of the *elenchus* is to examine the “truth-value of propositions,” or to at least demonstrate inconsistencies between opinions. Previous writers have only described Socrates using the *elenchus* on propositions, demonstrating the incompatibility of some of his interlocutors’ beliefs, and (on some occasions) showing others to be justified.⁷⁴ They were hoping to know what virtue is by coming up with a definition that proves to be not-false. However, what Socrates said he was doing was *examining life*, not propositions, by asking questions. In *Laches*, Nikias states that through questioning Socrates examines the manner in which his interlocutors live.⁷⁵ “This aspect of Socrates’ description of his mission has received virtually no attention in scholarly accounts of the *elenchus*.”⁷⁶

If Socrates’ aim was to examine life, and if the aim of the *elenchus* is to examine the truth-value of propositions, there is a problem. If life could be examined by an examination of propositions, this might clear up the problem, but unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case. The examination of propositions can only show which are false or not-false, it cannot indicate which propositions are true or which actions should be taken and which avoided.

Brickhouse and Smith make the further important point that if Socrates had used the *elenchus*, he would have had to recheck arguments that were disproved by rechecking

⁶⁸ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 6

⁶⁹ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 7

⁷⁰ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 8

⁷¹ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 9

⁷² Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p.10

⁷³ In Vlastos, G. (1983)

⁷⁴ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 13

⁷⁵ *La.* 187e

the secondary premises. There is no example of this in the *Dialogs*. He accepts the outcomes as final when in fact they could have been brought about by faulty argument. This seems to indicate that the answer that was being looked for was not whether the proposition was true or not, but something different.

At the conclusion of the *elenchus*, then, it would appear that it is incumbent upon the interlocutor only to revise at least one of his expressed beliefs, either the moral hypothesis itself or one of the beliefs from which the negation of the hypothesis has been deduced. Yet both Socrates and his interlocutor often act as if the moral hypothesis must be discarded because it has been refuted and its negation established. ...

This reaction is made all the more puzzling by the fact that Socrates' questioning seems merely to draw out various of the interlocutor's other beliefs which then serve as the premises of the *elenchus*. Typically, Socrates neither questions those beliefs nor argues for them. In the absence of independent reasons for accepting the premises of the *elenchus*, why do Socrates and his interlocutor abandon the moral hypothesis at issue and accept its negation because of an argument that only shows its inconsistency with those premises.⁷⁷

Brickhouse and Smith's argument is that Socrates did not consider he had a method, only a way. They also argue that this 'way' aimed at examining life, not propositions.

Whether Socrates considered he used a method or not, or whether he examined propositions or not is not relevant to this thesis. What is important is that Brickhouse and Smith, and Seeskin have, like Robinson, supported their arguments by using statements in the Earlier *Dialogs* supposedly made by Socrates about what it was he did. This same method can be used for other purposes and this is what I intend to do; to use the method to discover what it was Socrates actually did when he was examining others.

Saunders

Another writer to point out problems with the method of the *elenchus* is Saunders. He states that there is a problem with the induction step. That is, with the "logic of Socratic definition":

⁷⁶ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 13

⁷⁷ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 10

The procedure relies on an induction which is based on the assumption that the objects or acts which are the subject of the induction are correctly named, i.e. correctly identified as instances of the general term we are seeking. For instance, we collect several 'just' acts, and attempt to define 'justice.' But we may be mistaken in having supposed those acts to be 'just' in the first place. In that case, one or more non-just acts will have vitiated our definition. The definition, which is supposed to enable us to discriminate just action from unjust, seems to depend on the prior availability of the knowledge it is itself intended to supply.⁷⁸

The problem is that an action can be considered right or wrong, good or bad, depending on the circumstances. Virtue, on the other hand, is always considered right and good. What needs to be examined is the proposed action in its particular circumstances, and not the virtue it may be based on. This distinction between something that may change with the circumstances (the suitability of the action) and something that should never change (a virtue) points to a problem with the *elenchus* at the step of defining the virtue. This further adds to the argument that the *elenchus* cannot give a clear answer to the question of which action is best.

Socrates' Conditions for Participation in The Investigation

Socrates' rules of thumb, rules, or conditions for participating in the investigation have been mentioned several times above. Most writers discussing the *elenchus* mention these rules.

Robinson states that the interlocutor must believe his own primary statement or proposition, he must be convinced of the logical validity of argument, and he must genuinely accept the premises that are added to the primary proposition.⁷⁹

Vlastos adds that the person being questioned should refrain from speechifying, should give short, spare, direct, unevasive answers to the questions put to him, and should say what he believes to be true.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Saunders, T.J. Ed. (1987) p. 21

⁷⁹ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 15

⁸⁰ Vlastos (1983) p. 35

Seeskin says that the respondent must say what he really thinks⁸¹ and cannot hide behind hypotheticals. The questioner cannot force the respondent to accept something he does not really believe, and the respondent has the freedom to make whatever modifications he wishes, provided he remains consistent with himself.⁸²

In Radice: the interlocutor must believe the answers he gives to Socrates questions, his answer must take the form of a general definition, and it must be a definition and not a description.⁸³ Finally, Brickhouse and Smith also mention that the interlocutor must follow the rule of saying what he believes.⁸⁴

The Three Socrates

In looking for Socrates' method of investigation, do we accept the picture painted by Plato in the *Dialogs*, or do we rely on what Socrates says about what he does? Robinson, Vlastos, and others have presented the *elenchus* in a way that is clear and understandable, but the contradictions between it and what Socrates said he was doing indicate a difference between the two. It is these contradictions that lead to a way of identifying the actual Socrates and what he did.

Socrates says he asks questions and that he has no knowledge of his own. He also states his conditions, or rules of thumb, for anyone who wants to participate in the investigation. He appears to disagree with the focus on proving or disproving propositions when he clearly states that his mission is to examine the *lives* of men.⁸⁵ "Socrates does not say that untested propositions are not worth believing or that unexamined beliefs are not worth holding; he says that the unexamined *life* is not worth living."⁸⁶

However, this impression of a Socrates who only asked questions and who only reminded the interlocutor of the conditions when necessary cannot be completely true. Xenophon has several examples of him giving advice and explaining things;⁸⁷ however,

⁸¹ Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 1

⁸² Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 37

⁸³ Saunders, T.J. Ed. (1987) p. 29

⁸⁴ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p14

⁸⁵ *Ap.* 21c, 23b, 23c, 28e, 29e, 38a, 39c

⁸⁶ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 13

⁸⁷ Xenophon. *Memorabilia*

Socrates tells us that when he is investigating or examining he only asks questions and states the conditions.

It therefore appears that there are three Socrates in the *Dialogs*. The first is the historical Socrates, whoever he was; the second is the Socrates presented by Plato in the earlier *Dialogs* - Plato's interpretation of the historical Socrates and his attempt to explain what it was he did, and the third is the Socrates who is the mouthpiece for Plato's ideas in the Middle and Later *Dialogs*.

The historical Socrates can be partly identified from those statements he makes in the *Dialogs*. Unfortunately, many of them contradict the Socrates portrayed by Plato. Why would Plato present one Socrates and then include statements that are contradictory? It could be that he wanted to present a better method, or one that he believed would work, but at the same time stay true to his teacher. It may be that he did not want to put words into his teacher's mouth that were different from what he actually said. Whatever the reason, this has left us a way for identifying what Socrates did.

Summary

The method of investigation Socrates is portrayed using in Plato's Earlier *Dialogs* is the *elenchus*. This method is partly described in *Phaedo*, a Middle *Dialog*. Other descriptions have also appeared in texts written since the 1950's. In most of these texts, the *elenchus* is accepted as the historical Socrates' actual method. Recently, however, there has been some disagreement about what it was he did and whether he used the *elenchus*, based on an examination of his statements in the *Dialogs*. Earlier writers used these statements to identify Socrates' rules or conditions for participation in the investigation. More recent writers are using them to argue that Socrates did not consider he had a method.

These statements raise the question of whether Socrates considered he had a method, whether the *elenchus* can be used effectively for what its stated purpose is, and whether Socrates used the *elenchus* at all. The argument at present appears to be that Socrates did something, he considered to be a way or approach and not a method, and it was not the *elenchus*.

Whether Socrates considered he had a 'method,' or whether what he did can be considered a 'method' is not the focus of this thesis. The fact is he did something, he was well known for doing it, and Plato must have felt it was worth recording. Previous authors have used Socrates' statements to argue that he did not have a method, and that whatever it was he did, it was not the *elenchus*. What is important from these investigations is that the writers have presented a way to identify exactly what it was that Socrates did.

The problem therefore is whether enough information can be collected from the statements to identify and describe Socrates' way of investigating and examining. Providing we accept the statements recorded in the *Dialogs* as reliable, it appears that a provisional method can be identified and described. There is no reason to doubt the statements are not reliable. If they were Plato's statements, they would agree with the method he presents - the *elenchus* - there seems to be no reason to do otherwise. The fact that the statements do contradict the method indicates that Plato is quoting his teacher truthfully, while at the same time not portraying the actual method he used.

Purpose of the Thesis

Socrates did not use the *elenchus* when he was examining others, but he did do something. The purpose of this thesis is to identify and describe what it was. This will be done using the same method as Robinson, Seeskin, and Brickhouse and Smith; first identify statements in the Earlier *Dialogs* made by Socrates about what it was he did and then use these to construct 'a provisional method of Socratic investigation.' This method will be described and then illustrated with examples from two Earlier *Dialogs*: *Crito*, and *Euthyphro*.

Section 2: The Sources

Summary

There are three possible sources for information on Socrates; those who knew him, earlier writers who had access to texts that no longer exist, and modern Socratic scholars. From these sources, statements made by Socrates, as well as a description of him can be found. There are differences between writers, and it is from these that what Socrates did can be identified.

Introduction

The aim of this section is to describe the sources of information used in this thesis, to discuss the validity and reliability of this information, and to give a brief biography of Socrates.

The Sources Used

Many recent sources have described and explained the elenctic method fully and it is possible to formulate a fairly clear idea of it from these sources alone. This is not possible for Socrates' actual method, which is mainly to be found from hints in the early sources. Some later sources have mentioned certain aspects of Socrates' method, but until Brickhouse and Smith raised their objections,¹ no one was looking for another method.

The sources I have used are all in English, but there does not appear to be a problem with using translations from the Greek. Some of the words have been translated differently over the years. One example is the word *sophrosune*.² In the late nineteenth century it was translated as temperance, but modern translators now feel "self-control" is closer to the fifth and fourth century Greek meaning.³ I have compared several translations of the Earlier *Dialogs* and noted the differences. Although this may have some bearing on the content of Socrates' ideas, it does not seem to interfere with identifying the method.

¹ Other authors had pointed out the contradictions, but Brickhouse and Smith have given the strongest case against Socrates believing he used a method.

² Plato, *Charmides* translated by B. Jowett's @ <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/charmides.sum.html>

³ Radice, B. Ed.(1987) p. 165

The Range of Sources

The sources I have used can be divided into three groups. The first are the sources written by people who knew Socrates; Aristophanes, Plato and Xenophon. Next are two ancient sources; Aristotle and Diogenes Laertius, and finally are the modern Socratic scholars.

1. Aristophanes

Aristophanes, the playwright, was a contemporary of Socrates and portrayed him as a comic philosopher in his play the *Clouds* in 419 BC. It is likely that the real Socrates saw the play as it was quite popular and won a prize. In the play, the philosopher called Socrates is generally accepted to be a caricature composed of the characteristics of the real Socrates and the sophist philosophers of the time.⁴ Socrates himself did not consider himself to be a sophist and is often found explaining why in the *Dialogs*.

Although seemingly harmless at the time, the play ultimately worked against Socrates by giving Athenians the wrong impression of him and what he was trying to do. He is quoted in the play as being able to “make the weaker argument appear the stronger.” This an *eristic* argument, arguing for the sake of winning only, and Socrates was clearly opposed to this. He was arguing in the pursuit of truth.

Unfortunately the impression that Socrates was a sophist stuck and caused him problems. He mentioned the above quote at his trial and said it was not what he did. Plato also has Socrates express his dislike for the eristic argument in *Menexenus* to further counter the impression from the play. The *Clouds*, although it did not present the same Socrates as the one in Plato and Xenophon, presents a picture of what Socrates was not - a sophist who used eristic argument.

2. Plato

Plato was a student of Socrates and 28 years old when Socrates was executed. He wrote about 30 *Dialogs* (and at least one letter) in the first half of the fourth century, starting soon after Socrates' death, and had Socrates as the main character in all but one of them. In his earlier *Dialogs*, he appears to have wanted to present Socrates' ideas and methods as he saw them. Beavers and Planeaux (1998) state:

Whether or not Plato began to write philosophical *Dialogs* prior to Socrates' execution is a matter of debate. ... Although the order in which his *Dialogs* were written is a matter of strong debate, there is some consensus about how the Platonic corpus evolved. ... The first group, generally known as the "Socratic" *Dialogs*, was probably written between the years 399 and 387. These texts are called "Socratic" because here Plato appears to remain relatively close to what the historical Socrates advocated and taught. One of these, the *Apology*, was probably written shortly after the death of Socrates. The *Crito*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor* and *Major*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias* and *Ion*, were probably written throughout this twelve year period as well, some of them, like the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, most likely at its end.⁵

Plato's *Dialogs*

Most modern writers agree on two main points: that the *Dialogs* can be divided into Earlier, Middle and Later periods, and that the Earlier *Dialogs* can further be divided into the Elenctic *Dialogs*, which are more representative of the actual Socrates, and the Transition *Dialogs*.

See APPENDIX A: The Names and Generally Accepted Order of Plato's *Dialogs*.

The Earlier *Dialogs*

Plato's first *Dialog* was most likely the *Apology*. The form and some of the *Dialog* were based on an earlier account of a speech by Gorgias; the *Apology of Palamedes*.⁶ Plato's *Apology* was written while most people could still remember Socrates, some may even have been at his trial and would have been able to recall his speeches. For this reason, Plato would probably have wanted to give a fairly accurate description of Socrates and the trial.⁷ Plato was writing in defence of Socrates and if he presented an obviously false version of him it would be known and work against him. This means the *Apology* can be used as a starting point for discovering the historical Socrates. What Socrates says in the *Apology* is probably fairly close to what he actually said and parts in the other *Dialogs* that agree with it are more likely to be reliable.

⁴ Dover, K.J., *Socrates in the Clouds*, in Vlastos, G. (1971) *The Philosophy of Socrates*. Anchor Books. New York.

⁵ Beavers, F.A. and Planeaux, C. (1998) *Exploring Plato's Dialogs: A Virtual Learning Environment on the World Wide Web*. Internet Applications Laboratory at the University of Evansville. <http://plato.evansville.edu/life.htm>

⁶ Seeskin, K. (1987) p. 56

⁷ A.R. Lacey in Vlastos, G. (1971)

The Middle *Dialogs*

The middle *Dialogs* present more of Plato's ideas. He moves away from Socrates' exclusive focus on ethics in the Earlier *Dialogs* and experiments with different forms of inquiry and different subjects. Some important differences are the development of the theory of Forms, the dialectic argument and the exposition. He also introduces other forms of argument. In the Republic Plato's Socrates uses one of these other types of argument to come up with a description of the ideal state.

The Later *Dialogs*

The later *Dialogs* are longer and show some degree of rethinking. This may have been after Plato's two adventures in Sicily, where he was invited to try to put some of his ideas into practice. He was not successful. He proved Socrates' decision not to become involved in politics to be sensible. Plato appears to reject some of his earlier ideas in these *Dialogs*, notably the theory of Forms. It seems that he spent his life questioning and was not afraid to change opinions that he had once believed to be true.

Differences

Plato's and Socrates' ideas can be found in the *Dialogs*, but there are differences between them. Socrates said he was only interested in ethics, but Plato has him investigating metaphysics and epistemology. Plato also experiments with and introduces different types of arguments, those of his own and those of the sophists; for example dialectic and eristic arguments. Socrates states that he only drew ideas out of the listener, and in fact this is more in keeping with the original meaning of the word education; educe – to draw out. Plato has Socrates presenting his own ideas, such as the theory of recollection in *Meno*, and the theory of Forms. The differences between the Socrates that Plato presents in the Earlier and Later *Dialogs* are marked, but differences can be noticed even within a single *Dialog*. Again in *Meno*, Socrates starts by asking questions but changes about halfway through and teaches the slave.

The Earlier *Dialogs* are considered to have more of Socrates' ideas in them, while Plato's ideas are more to be found in the Middle and Later *Dialogs*. Various scholars

have used different methods to order the *Dialogs* to make the delineation more distinct and a good summary can be found in *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues*.⁸

The main method of inquiry in the first ten *Dialogs* is the *elenchus*. The later *Dialogs* have elenctic arguments, the extended expository argument in the *Republic*, and the drawing of mathematical knowledge from the slave in *Meno*. These are examples of Plato's thinking and show his development and exposure to other influences over time.⁹ It cannot be argued that Socrates never used other types of argument (or that he never gave advice or taught directly¹⁰), but only that Plato presents him using the *elenchus*.

Alkibiades

I have included material from *Alkibiades*, a *Dialog* I discovered on the Internet and have since found in older texts. It does not appear in recent lists of Plato's *Dialogs*. "The interesting final section has provoked attacks on the dialog's authenticity. But it is doubtful whether some of the allegedly objectionable 'un-Platonic' views really appear."¹¹ It was included in the texts last century, and it is reappearing in some recent texts.

3. Xenophon

Xenophon was also a student of Socrates and a contemporary of Plato. He wrote a number of books on a variety of topics, including three in the form of Socratic *Dialogs*.¹² There was also a fourth that uses Socrates as a mouthpiece for ideas that are so clearly Xenophon's own that it cannot be used to get any impression of the actual Socrates.¹³ Xenophon had a less literary style than Plato, and gives a drier, more matter of fact description of Socrates. He has been criticized for his style and lack of philosophical expertise in presenting Socrates' ideas, but it may be that the opposite is true; Socrates may have been as down-to-earth and common-sensical as Xenophon portrays him, and Plato may have taken the greater license.

⁸ Brandwood, L. (1990)

⁹ For example, his exposure to Pythagorean mathematics and his subsequent development of the dialectical argument.

¹⁰ Xenophon has some examples of both.

¹¹ Jowett, B. (1970) *The Dialogs of Plato*. Vol. 1. Sphere Books. London. p. 237

¹² Namely Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, *Symposium*, and *Apology*.

¹³ Xenophon. *Oeconomicus*.

A criticism of Socrates was apparently written after his death by Isocrates. It has been suggested that Plato wrote his *Apology* (the defence Socrates gave at his trial) before Isocrates' criticism and Xenophon wrote his *Apology* after it. Xenophon's *Apology* may also give a fairly accurate picture of Socrates, for the same reasons as those given for Plato's *Apology*. However, it presents a different version of Socrates, among other things, a Socrates who accepted the verdict of the court as a way out of old age and decay.

4. Aristotle

Aristotle, a student of Plato, was born fifteen years after Socrates died and included information on him in some of his writings from the second half of the 3rd century. He must have heard some stories from his teacher, Plato, and from others who were students of Socrates. He gives some Descriptions of Socrates' ideas.

5. Diogenes Laertius

Another important source is Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, compiled early in the third century from sources that have long since disappeared. Amongst the biographies is a lot of factual information about Socrates, his predecessors, and those who came after him, especially those who carried on his ideas. Many of the stories are entertaining, although there are contradictions at various places that indicate it is not completely reliable. He gives a more human picture of Socrates than Plato, probably because he was not trying to do anything more than introduce the man himself. Some quotes:

He was formidable in public speaking.

Socrates and his pupil Aeschines were the first to teach rhetoric.

He was the first who discoursed on the conduct of life and the first philosopher who was tried and put to death.

He showed equal ability in both directions, in persuading and dissuading men.

He had the skill to draw his arguments from facts.

There is, he said, only one good, that is knowledge, and only one evil, that is, ignorance.¹⁴

¹⁴ Diogenes Laertius, Book II, 18 - 47

6. Contemporary Fragments

Many of the surviving contemporary fragments were written by the people who knew Socrates. One was written by Aeschines, a close friend who was with Socrates on the day he died. The fragments give only a small amount of information about Socrates and his ideas.

7. Recent Sources

The last group of sources are those by the modern Socratic, as opposed to Platonic, scholars. This group has only arisen in any number since Robinson's *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* in 1953 moved the focus from the philosophy to the method of inquiry in the *Dialogs*. The Socratic scholars have several areas of disagreement, but they have been helpful in identifying the person they consider to be the historical Socrates and describing his method; the *elenchus*.

All writers agree that there are at least two versions of Socrates. These are based on differences in style, philosophy, method, the language used or, in some cases, the historical settings. Vlastos is one example:

In different segments of Plato's corpus two philosophers bear that name. The individual remains the same, but in different sets of *Dialogs* he pursues philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabiting the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic. They are so diverse in content and method that they contrast as sharply with one another as with any third philosophy you care to mention, beginning with Aristotle's.¹⁵

Most writers agree that the early *Dialogs* of Plato are closer to the historical Socrates because the philosophy and area of concern is narrower. The opinion that the Earlier *Dialogs* are more representative of the historical Socrates has been proposed for at least a hundred years:

The most recent research (in 1883) has shown more and more clearly that the most trustworthy sources for Socrates' own peculiar philosophy are almost exclusively Plato's *Apology*, his earliest *Dialogs* and the speech of Alkibiades in the *Symposium*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Vlastos, G. (1991) p. 46

¹⁶ Zeller, E. (1883) p. 98

It is still generally accepted:

I do not of course discuss all the *Dialogs* in which Socrates is the protagonist. I take as a starting point the accepted division of Plato's *Dialogs* into early, middle, and late, and I deal almost exclusively with the first third, appropriately called the Socratic *Dialogs*.¹⁷

However, Plato may have presented his own version of Socrates from the start, and he may have had his reasons for this. It is realistic to accept that the Socrates in the early *Dialogs* is more representative of the historical Socrates and that Plato moved away from this as he continued to write more *Dialogs* and develop his own ideas. It is also realistic to assume that the method Socrates is presented as using in the earlier *Dialogs*, the *elenchus*, is more likely to be like the one he actually used.

The Information Available

Several versions of Socrates can be compiled from the writings of Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle and Diogenes Laertius. There are differences between different authors. There are differences between the same author at different times. And, there are sometimes differences within the one piece of writing (Plato's *Meno* for example). With Plato and Xenophon, the different versions are the result of their sometimes presenting their own ideas through Socrates. Although Socrates' ideas and philosophy vary with the version being presented, the factual details of his life are fairly consistent in the majority of the sources, and for this reason can be relied on. From the sources, he is presented him as a practical, pragmatic, down-to-earth character, and it is to be expected that the method he used is likewise.

The Historical Socrates

Socrates was born in Athens in 469 BC, and was executed in 399 BC when he was 70 years old. Socrates lived through the golden age of Athens, which dated from the turning back of the Persian army at Marathon in 490, and the victories at Salamis in 480 and at Plataea in 479 until the final defeat by the Spartans in 404 BC. He was apparently employed when he was young on the stone-work on the Acropolis and he had a wife, Xanthippe, and three sons; Lamprocles, Sophroniscus, and Menexenus. He may have had a second wife, Myrto, late in life.

¹⁷ Santas, G.X. (1979) *Socrates: The Arguments of the Philosophers*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London. p. xi

Socrates had the traditional education of an Athenian citizen: grammar, music and gymnastics. He knew and could quote from Homer, and does so many times in the *Dialogs*. He was either educated in philosophy, or educated himself. He heard Zeno read a treatise when he was young and he observed Parmenides use the question and answer method of investigation. He took a one-drachma course of lectures (instead of the fifty-drachma one) from Prodicus, an expert on words.

In the *Apology*, Socrates appears to have denied he ever taught anyone anything, he said he never demanded payment for what he did, and he would converse and discuss with anyone who cared to listen. He had a house and at least one servant. But, because he did not accept money for his teaching, he had to live a frugal life. He did this from choice, but his wife, or wives, may have been less than happy with the situation.

Socrates spent most of his life in Athens, he said he had enough to do there and so he did not need to go anywhere else. The only times he left Athens were on military expeditions which could have been for up to a year or more. He fought in three battles; at Potidaea in 433 BC, when he saved Alkibiades life, at Delium in 424 BC against the Boiotians when he was praised for courage in the retreat, and at Amphipolis in 422 BC.

He claimed to have an inner voice that would come and go. It never told him what to do, but only what not to do. This left him free to contemplate most things, knowing he would be cautioned to stop if he was about to do wrong. The best example of this is in the *Apology* when he was not stopped from presenting his own defence off the cuff, or from offering to pay a 30 minae fine. Although the verdict went against him, he believed “that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death.”¹⁸ He believed the verdict was for a greater good that he was not able to conceive at the time.

Socrates was considered by some to be anti-democratic because he took no part in politics. Athenians regarded someone “who takes no part in politics not as one who sticks to his own business but as a man who is good for nothing.”¹⁹ However, Socrates

¹⁸ *Ap.* 41d

¹⁹ Stated by Pericles in his *Funeral Oration* for the soldiers killed in the Peloponnesian Wars (Thucydides):

believed that his habit of telling the truth would have meant he “should have perished long ago, and done no good either to you or myself.”²⁰

He believed that a person should do what he considers on reflection to be right. In the *Apology* he gave two examples of how he followed what he believed to be right, at the possible cost to his own life; he would not be involved in trying several naval commanders who had not rescued sailors from the sea after their victory at Arginusae, and during the oligarchy of the thirty tyrants he refused to bring in Leon of Salamis for execution (it being the custom at this time of executing the rich and appropriating their wealth).²¹

Socrates was brought to trial in 399 BC for not believing in the gods in which the state believed, for bringing in other new divinities, and for corrupting the youth. He defended himself at the trial, but lost. He was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock, and after a short time in the jail waiting for a ship to return from a pilgrimage to Delos, this is what he did.

²⁰ *Ap.* 31d

²¹ *Ap.* 32c

Section 3: What Socrates Examined

Summary

Socrates stated his first mission was to understand the riddle of the Oracle. At the time, all he knew was that he knew nothing good. As a result of examining others who were considered wise, he decided that the only reason the Oracle considered him wise was because he knew that he knew nothing. From this he decided that a wise person is one who knows he knows nothing.

Socrates next mission was to help others become wise. He did this by cross-examination. But, what did he examine? He said he examined knowledge; the knowledge of how to live well, and this is the knowledge of which actions bring the best results. There are two main types of opinions; which actions are best, and which results are best. Everyone has different opinions of what these are so they cannot all be right; a method is needed to decide. The method appears to examine the opinions and lead people to discover they cannot know which action is best in each situation. They can then decide if it would be wise to take the particular action being examined.

Introduction

This section looks at the question of what Socrates examined. In Section 1 the majority opinion that Socrates used the elenctic method to examine propositions was presented. Recent writers such as Seeskin, and Brickhouse and Smith are now disagreeing with this. If Socrates did not examine propositions of virtue, what did he examine? To answer this question, statements made by Socrates about what it was he did will be presented with the aim of letting them indicate what it was he examined. The *Apology* is used as the starting point for this section, and other statements that agree with the general description given by Socrates at his trial are added.

1. Socrates First Mission - Who is Wise?

At some undetermined time in Socrates' early life, when he apparently already had a reputation for wisdom, his friend Chaerepho went to the Oracle at Delphi and asked if there was anyone wiser than Socrates. "And the Pythian priestess replied there was none."¹ This was a puzzle for Socrates. The god surely would not lie, but also Socrates

¹ *Ap.* 21a

was aware from his own examinations that he knew nothing; yet he was meant to be the wisest. “What does the god mean, and what is this riddle of his?”²

It appears that Socrates had realized that he knew nothing before his friend’s visit to the Oracle, but at the time, he may not have considered this to be wisdom. From observing the different opinions of right and wrong, good and bad, it seems to be the only rational conclusion that can be reached. There are many differences of opinion and not everyone can be right, the problem is to determine who is. But not only people differ, “The gods also differ in their opinions of what is right and noble, base and good and evil ...”³

Cryptic messages were often received from Oracles in ancient times and deciphering their meaning was believed to be an important part of the process of understanding them fully. Socrates was presumably aware of this and believed he had been given this task, “and then with the utmost reluctance I set out to investigate in the manner I now describe.”⁴ To do this, Socrates first went to the people considered wise and examined them to find out if they actually were. He examined politicians, poets, craftsmen, and common citizens. One example was Euthyphro, on his way to charge his father with murder:

Socrates: But, in god’s name, Euthyphro, do you actually consider yourself so expert in your knowledge of the divine and of what is or is not holy, that under the circumstances which you mentioned you are not afraid of being yourself guilty of an unholy act in prosecuting your father?

Euthyphro: I should be a useless fellow, Socrates, if I had not expert knowledge in all these matters: and Euthyphro would in no way be superior to the mass of mankind.⁵

2. The Answer to The Riddle - The Definition of Wisdom

What he says he discovered was that those who considered themselves, and were considered by others, to be wise were not. In fact, “others, of inferior repute, seemed to be their superiors in good sense.”⁶ Socrates endeavored to convince them that though

² *Ap.* 21b

³ *Eu.* 7e

⁴ *Ap.* 21b

⁵ *Eu.* 4e

⁶ *Ap.* 22a

they thought themselves wise, they were not.⁷ He came to the impression⁸ after examining one 'wise' man that he eventually came to for all; "At least I am wiser than he is: for in all probability neither of us knows **anything good**, but he fancies that he does, though he does not, whereas I, even as I have no knowledge, do not think that I have. Apparently I am his superior in wisdom to this small extent at least, that what I know not I do not imagine that I know."⁹

Socrates concluded the Oracle had only used him as an example of wisdom. What the god actually meant: "And apparently he speaks of Socrates here and takes me as an example by using my name, just as if he should say: 'that man among human beings is most wise who like Socrates has learnt that in reality his wisdom is nothing worth.'"¹⁰ That man who has discovered that he does not know anything good.

From unraveling the riddle of the Oracle, Socrates came to define wisdom as the realization that we can never know anything good (where once he may have only thought of it as common sense). Each person who accepts this definition would need to take steps to make sure they do not act on what can only be considered opinion. It may be right, but it is only right by chance.

Socrates: Therefore true opinion is as good a guide as knowledge for the purpose of acting rightly. ... so right opinion is something no less useful than knowledge.

Meno: Except that the man with knowledge will always be successful, and the man with right opinion only sometimes.

Socrates: What, will he not always be successful so long as he has the right opinion?

Meno: That must be so, I suppose. In that case, I wonder why knowledge should be so much more prized than right opinion, and indeed how there is any difference between them.

Socrates: Shall I tell you the reason for your surprise, or do you know it?¹¹

With a definition of wisdom, Socrates was able to begin his second mission.

⁷ *Ap.* 21c

⁸ *Ap.* 21d

⁹ *Ap.* 21d

¹⁰ *Ap.* 23a

¹¹ *Me.* 97b

3. Socrates Second Mission - Teach Wisdom

Socrates says his second mission was to help people examine their beliefs and from this, hopefully lead them to the realization that they can only ever be opinions. They may be true in some cases, but not in all. Once they have the realization that they do not know what they once believed they did (Socrates' definition of wisdom), they may then be more inclined to examine their opinions to discover if they are right for each particular situation.

4. Examining

To help people discover wisdom and learn how to live, Socrates says he went "around ... searching and examining, at the god's command, any man, whether citizen or stranger, whom I think to be wise: and whenever he does not appear so to me, I come to the god's assistance and point out that the man is not wise."¹² This is what he spent his time doing, and this is what he was known for.

Perhaps (Euthyphro) ... you are not ready to teach your wisdom: but I myself - well, I am afraid they (the Athenians) consider that through my love for humanity I pour forth lavishly to one and all everything that is mine, and not only ask no payment but would gladly pay money myself to any who care to listen to me.¹³

Unfortunately, besides being well known for doing what he did, he was also disliked. At his trial more than half voted against him. "I have incurred many enmities of the most bitter and grievous kind ..." ¹⁴ "And consequently their victims are angry with me instead of with themselves, and they say that Socrates is a most pestilent fellow who corrupts the youth ..." ¹⁵

How Socrates did this examination is the topic of the next section.

5. Knowledge

Socrates stated that he was examining others to see if they had the knowledge that he called wisdom, but what type of knowledge is wisdom? What knowledge did Socrates examine? Surely it was not the knowledge of what the capital of a certain country is, or

¹² *Ap.* 23b

¹³ *Eu.* 3d

¹⁴ *Ap.* 22e

¹⁵ *Ap.* 23c

what Homer said. Socrates said he was examining knowledge about what he believed to be most important; knowledge of how to live well, how a man ought to live - how he ought to act.

Now perhaps someone may say: 'Are you not ashamed, Socrates, of having engaged in an occupation which now exposes you to the danger of death?' To him I could reply with justice: 'you are mistaken, my friend, if you think that a man of even the slightest merit ought to calculate risks of life and death, but ought not rather in every action to consider whether it is right or wrong, the act of a good man or an evil.'¹⁶

6. How to Live - The Good Life

Socrates states he is examining the knowledge of how to live, but not just to live; to live the good life. "And consider further whether it still holds good with us or not that it is not life, but the good life, that we should esteem of the highest importance."¹⁷ "Apparently he is a man of wisdom; ... and in my opinion he is the only man who is making the right beginning in politics: for the right thing is to look after our young first and see that they become as good as possible."¹⁸

The good life is the one with the most good and the least harm. The crux of Socrates argument appears to be that good men do good, and evil men do harm. A person is judged by the actions he takes. The more good he does, the better for himself and those around him. But, if he does harm to others, it will find its way back to him.

Is it better to live among good or evil citizens? ... do not evil men do harm to those who at any time are their neighbors, and good men do good? ... is there any man who prefers to be harmed rather than benefited by his associates?¹⁹

Evil men always do evil to those who are closest to them, and the good some good, ... if I make any of my associates a knave, I am likely to suffer some harm from him, ..."²⁰ "For I esteem it most important to win your approval in acting as I do, rather than to act against your wishes."²¹

¹⁶ *Ap.* 28b

¹⁷ *Cr.* 48b

¹⁸ *Eu.* 2c

¹⁹ *Ap.* 25c

²⁰ *Ap.* 25e

²¹ *Cr.* 48e

7. The Good Life is Based on Actions

For Socrates, the good life is the result of doing good. This means the life a person lives is the result of the actions he takes. Best actions can be defined as those that bring about the best results, and therefore the best life is the result of the best actions. The problem is deciding which actions bring about the best results.

Everyone has different opinions about which actions, or behavior, are acceptable and which are not. “If then those of you who are considered superior in wisdom or courage or any other virtue are going to behave in such a fashion, it would be a shameful affair.”²² But what appears shameful to one appears honorable, or at least acceptable to another. It is therefore not a case of doing what the many do, or believe to be best, nor what has been labeled acceptable, but of seeking to discover the truth for oneself. “Why should we trouble about what most people think (Crito)? ... But you see, Socrates, that we must heed the opinions of the general public also.”²³

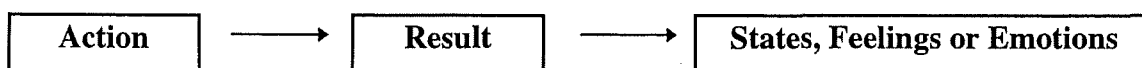
Socrates: But why are you suing him, and what is the charge?

Euthyphro: Murder, Socrates.

Socrates: Heavens above! Surely, Euthyphro, the majority of people must be ignorant of what is right! I cannot believe that the ordinary person should act as you do, but only a man already far advanced in wisdom.”²⁴

8. Based on Opinions

Everyone has opinions of which actions are right, but they cannot all be right when they are different. Add to this the fact that the one action never brings about the same result twice, it depends on context, time and place.²⁵ Experience is only a guide, not a rule. What has happened in the past need not happen again, unless the circumstances are exactly the same, and this is impossible. The opinions must be examined to discover which of them are right in each situation. The diagram illustrates the situation.



²² *Ap.* 35a

²³ *Cr.* 44c

²⁴ *Eu.* 4a

²⁵ Or: A man can never step into the same river twice. (Greek proverb)

8a. Opinions of Which Actions are Best

The first set of opinions to consider is which actions are believed to be best. For whatever reason, people usually have ideas of what right actions are and which actions are most appropriate in which situations. One person says Action A should be taken, another says it should be Action B.

But it is always about one particular act, I imagine, Euthyphro, that disputes arise among both gods and men, if indeed gods do disagree: it is with regard to some individual action that they differ when one party claims that it is right and the other that it is wrong. Is it not so?²⁶

But the selfsame things, according to you, are considered right by one group (of gods) and wrong by another and it is because they disagree about these matters that they quarrel and fight with each other.²⁷

Because right actions vary with the circumstances, and because an action may be right one time and wrong the next, people have different types of opinions. Sometimes they fall back on a set of rules, or the advice of those 'wiser' than themselves, or what they have been taught, or what happened last time. Whatever type, the opinion of which action to take needs to be examined to make sure it is the best, and this means, it will bring about the best results.

8b. Opinions of Which Results are Best

The second set of opinions is of which results are best. Certain results bring about certain states, feelings, or emotions. Socrates states several times that he has very little in the way of possessions, but that he was satisfied and happy with this. Others need more before they are happy; power or prestige or honor. "For (a victory at the Olympic games) but gives you the semblance of happiness, I the reality: ..." ²⁸ Everyone has different requirements for happiness. Socrates argument was that, "good actions lead to happiness, ... and he who acts honorably also acts well ... and they who act well are happy; happy because they obtain things that are good ... and they obtain good things by acting well and honorably ..." ²⁹

²⁶ *Eu.* 8e

²⁷ *Eu.* 8a

²⁸ *Ap.* 36d

²⁹ *Alk.* 116b

The best results bring the greatest success, which in turn bring the greatest happiness. But because people have different requirements for happiness, there will be opinions over which results are best. In the *Apology* Socrates says that “goodness does not come from money, but it is from goodness that money and all other good things come.”³⁰ He further states: “He who is not wise and good cannot be happy.”³¹

Overall opinions of how to live well also vary. The fact that people live differently means not everyone knows which is best. Each person believes they know what the best life is, and this is what they aim at, but how can they tell? “When a man is in training ... he must act and exercise, eat and drink with the approval of the one man, the master and expert, ... if he disobeys this one man, disregarding his opinion and approval and respecting those of the ignorant multitude, will he not suffer harm?”³²

And specifically in the case of right and wrong, the shameful and the honorable, good and evil, which are now under discussion, should he follow the opinion of the many and fear it, or of the one man (if there are any expert in such matters), whom we ought to fear and respect more than all the others? Since if we refuse to follow him, we shall injure and destroy that which, we saw, is improved by right and ruined by wrong.³³

Then surely life is not worth living with that part of us ruined which wrong injures and right improves. ... Then, my good friend, we must not pay too much heed to what the many will say about us, but rather to the judgement of the expert in right and wrong.³⁴

This appears to mean that the only way of telling if a person is living the best life is if the person is improving that part that right improves, and not ruining that part that wrong ruins. And who is this “expert in right and wrong”? There can be experts in various crafts and sports, but the fact is that no one can be an expert in right and wrong because no one knows anything good, only how to discover which actions are best in each particular case. Socrates seems to be saying that the only real expert in the type of

³⁰ *Ap.* 30b

³¹ *Alk.* 133e

³² *Cr.* 47b

³³ *Cr.* 47c

³⁴ *Cr.* 48a

examination he was interested in is rational thought (or Truth³⁵) itself. And the person has to inquire to discover this for himself.

9. Best Actions

Socrates believes that people act in the manner they believe best. That is, in a manner that they believe will bring about the best results. This will be based on opinions of which actions are best and therefore worth taking, and which results are best and therefore worth aiming at. At times these are the person's own individual opinions of which actions should be taken, at other times they are accepted general opinions, but no one action will bring about the same result each time, and so no one action will always be the best.

Because actions are taken because they are expected to bring about certain results, the results, or consequences of the actions need to be considered before taking them. based on these, a decision can be made on whether the action appears best or not. This means stopping to consider the action.

One should never do wrong then? ... Even when wronged then we should never retaliate with wrong, ... should we do injury to anyone or not? ... and is it right to repay injury with injury, as the many think we should? ... For there is no difference between injuring and wronging a man. ... we should not then requite wrong with wrong or injure any man, no matter what he has done to us. And in assenting to this, Crito, mind you do not assent against your real opinions. ... you too then must consider most seriously whether you share and partake of this opinion and whether we are to make this our starting-point in our deliberations, that it is never right to do wrong or to repay wrong with wrong or to take revenge by returning an injury when we have suffered one, or whether you dissent and reject this starting-point.³⁶

From considering the action, we have a better idea of what consequences to expect. If we do wrong, we should expect retaliation, even though we know it is 'wrong' and would not do it ourselves. These ideas are all part of the opinions we apply to life and living.

³⁵ Cr. 48a

³⁶ Cr. 49b

10. We Cannot Know so We Have to Examine

In *Crito*, Crito believed it was right for Socrates to escape from prison and was willing to help him do so. Socrates disagreed, but left it for the examination to judge. “Let us consider whether or not it is right for me to attempt to escape from here without the permission of the Athenians: and if it appears right, let us try: but if not, let us give up.”³⁷

Wisdom is not knowing what, but knowing how. That is, wisdom is not the knowledge of what is best, because this is impossible according to Socrates; but rather, the knowledge of how to examine opinions.

Which opinion is right? Socrates argues that the wise person, like himself, will accept they know nothing except opinions - and therefore examine them. The wise person, who knows he knows nothing, for this will reason examine opinions to discover which are best; not which are true. Only god can know the truth, the most we can hope for is to be lovers of truth.

If Socrates could help people realize that what they believed to be best may not be, they may see the benefit of examining their opinions and want to continue. The experience with Socrates may entice them to examine all proposed actions in the future, with or without Socrates' help. At least, this was what Socrates believed his mission to be and what he appeared to be trying to do; to convince others that this is how life can be examined and the benefits of doing so.

How then can we investigate these matters in the fairest possible way? If we take up first of all what you say about opinions. Were we right in saying on various occasions that we should pay heed to some opinions, but not to others? ... it was observed ... on many occasions that we should attach high value to some of the opinions held by men, but not to others. ... consider then: do you think it a satisfactory statement that we should respect some, but not all, of the opinions of men; and not the opinions of all men, but those of some, and not of others? What do you say? Is this a true statement?³⁸

³⁷ Cr. 48b

³⁸ Cr. 46d

We must consider then whether we should take such action or not. For my principle both in the past and at this moment has always been the same, to listen to nothing else in me except the rule which on reflection seems the best.³⁹ (Same quote, different wording: “For I am and always have been one of those natures who must be guided by reason, whatever the reason may be which upon reflection appears to me to be the best; ... I cannot repudiate my own doctrines, which seem to me as sound as ever.”⁴⁰)

Socrates seems to be saying that each action needs to be examined to first of all discover what the expected results are, and then to decide if they are the best, or at least, if they will be beneficial or detrimental to the person taking them. The evidence suggests that Socrates focuses on the results and consequences of actions. “As a consequence of this then, consider whether in leaving the prison without the city’s consent we are not doing an injury, and that too to those whom we least ought to injure?”⁴¹

But, all the expected results need to be considered and this is what the examination does. “Tell us, Socrates, what do you propose to do? By this act which you contemplate is it not your intention to destroy us, the laws, and the whole city, as far as you can?”⁴² “So that if we try to destroy you because we think it right, you to the utmost of your power will endeavor in turn to destroy us, the laws, and your fatherland, and will claim you are right in so acting, you who set up to be the true devotee of goodness?”⁴³ But, Socrates, “consider, what good will you do yourself or your friends by thus transgressing or committing any such offence (as escaping from prison)? It must be pretty evident that your friends too will be in danger of being exiled and deprived of their country or of losing their property (for helping you).”⁴⁴

Or consider yourself Socrates, what will life be like for you wherever you go. You are not going to be welcomed anywhere else, if you have broken the laws here people will imagine you will do so again. And who will want to listen to you when you have made a lie by your actions of what you have spent your life saying? “For neither in this world

³⁹ Cr. 46b

⁴⁰ Cr. 46b (Jowett version)

⁴¹ Cr. 49e

⁴² Cr. 50a

⁴³ Cr. 51a

⁴⁴ Cr. 53a

does such conduct seem good or righteous or holy for you or for any of your friends, nor will it seem good in you when you have gone to the other world.”⁴⁵

To make sure all the expected results and consequences are examined, Socrates appears to continue questioning well beyond those most obvious, and well beyond what the person appears to have originally considered when deciding to take the particular action. He makes sure everything connected with the action is considered; the results, the consequences of the result, the consequences of the consequences, results that may have been overlooked or purposely ignored, and short-term and long term results. The method examines both widely (all the possible consequences) and deeply (consequences of consequences of consequences). This complete examination of an action is often what is missed by people who tend to only consider the most obvious or the most immediate consequences.

No one can really know how to live well, it has to be discovered one specific action at a time. The wise person therefore, knowing that he does not know, but knowing that he can discover for each action, will examine each action in this way and take only those actions that appear to guarantee the best results. This will bring about the best life. A person may know but not act, or he may act but not know, it is only when there is knowledge and action that there is wisdom.

11. Double Result - Can Never Know, But Can Discover

As a result of the examination a person discovers two things. The first is that she does not know what she believed she did. This may lead to the realization that she can never know anything about which actions are best. The second is discovering whether the specific action being examined is best or not, and therefore whether she should take it.

This appears to be the wider meaning of wisdom, the knowledge that actions must be examined before taken. If not, they may be right, but this will only be due to right opinion. And while right opinion may be enough for some people, it was not for Socrates.

⁴⁵ Cr. 54b

Conclusion

Socrates appears to examine lives by rationally examining people's actions or beliefs about actions. What this does is allow a person to discover what results an action will most probably bring about. The person then has the choice of whether to take the action. If the person knows that a particular action will bring about the best result, he would be wise to take it. Otherwise, he may either not know which action is best and take the one that is believed best and possibly make a mistake, or know which action is best but either not take it or take a different action. Socrates states that leading a good life means leading an examined life; this means examining the actions one takes in living each time before taking them. Wisdom is knowing that you know nothing and that you will have to examine each action to make sure it is the best, and then taking those that are discovered to be best. These will result in the best life.

Section 4: How Socrates Examined

Summary

Statements made by Socrates identify the method he used. Starting with the statements that he was engaged in moral philosophy, he believed he had no knowledge in the area he was concerned with, and he did not consider he was a teacher, other characteristics can be added. These characteristics quite fully indicate what Socrates did and this leads to a complete method being identified.

The method Socrates used can be identified from his statements. It is to ask people to give their reasons for taking an action. Some gave their reasons in terms of consequences, others gave their reasons as general statements. For the first type of answer, Socrates examines the expected consequences of the intended action by asking the person to answer truthfully why they believe they are taking the right action and what they expect the results to be. Once all the consequences have been discovered and examined, a rational decision can be made as to the wisdom of taking the action.

The second type of answer, the general statements, will be dealt with in the next section.

Introduction

The starting point for identifying Socrates' method of examination is his beliefs that he was engaged in ethics or moral philosophy, that he did not have knowledge in the area he was examining, and that he did not teach. From here, the characteristics of the method can be identified from his statements, and from these a description of the method can be presented.

Moral philosophy - Not Natural Philosophy

It appears that Socrates' focus was on moral philosophy, or ethics, although there is not universal agreement over exactly what these terms mean. However, the dictionary agrees fairly closely with what Socrates appears to be doing. "Ethics deals with moral beliefs, rules, principles and questions about what is morally right and wrong. The basis of ethics is the belief that some behavior is right and acceptable and that other behavior is wrong. The moral philosopher seeks to discover which is which."¹ Socrates aim was to rationally discover this for himself, and help others to do likewise.

¹ *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*. (1995)

It is possible that Socrates earlier studied or had been interested in natural philosophy, the investigation into the nature of reality, but he seems to have spent most of his life pointing out it was not what he did. At the age of seventy, Socrates was still doing this, which may indicate what he did was new, or at least unusual or uncommon.

One of the charges against him was that he was, “a busy-body and is guilty of investigating things beneath the earth and in the sky above, and of making the weaker argument the stronger, and of teaching others these same things.”² This quote had originally come from Aristophanes portrayal of him in the *Clouds* and became the commonly accepted description of all natural philosophers and sophists. Socrates reply to this charge was; “And I speak not with any disrespect for such knowledge, ... but in fact, I have no concern whatever with such things.”³

Aristotle clearly states that Socrates was engaged in moral philosophy, and emphasizes that this was done by rational means:

In his youth Plato first became acquainted with Cratylus and the Heraclitean doctrines - that the whole sensible world is always in a state of flux, and that there is no scientific knowledge of it - and in after years he still held these opinions. And when Socrates, disregarding the physical universe and confining his study to moral questions, sought in this sphere for the universal and was the first to concentrate upon definition, ...⁴

Now Socrates devoted his attention to the moral virtues, and was the first to seek a general definition of these ... and he naturally inquired into the essence of things; for he was trying to reason logically, and the starting-point of all logical reasoning is the essence.”⁵

His interest in moral philosophy appears to have been influenced by hearing a treatise by Anaxagoras on how, “Mind is the disposer and cause of all things: ... and the conclusion from this argument was that a man ought to take account only of what is best

² *Ap.* 19c

³ *Ap.* 19c

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. I. vi. 2.

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. XIII. iv. 3

and most fitting both for himself and for everything else.”⁶ This appears to have led him to consider that it is natural for all things to act in the way they believe best.

Socrates’ aim was moral philosophy, in terms of discovering how to act, and presumably the method he used will have the same aim; to rationally discover right and wrong behavior.

Socrates Disavowal of Knowledge

The next point to consider is Socrates’ belief that he had no knowledge. The *Dialogs* show Socrates to be well versed in Homer and the history of Greece. He appears to have known various theories of natural philosophy. He knew what went on in the court of the great king. What did he mean by his statement that he had no knowledge, or no knowledge of “anything good”?⁷ Did he really mean this or did he just use it as a strategy to trap others?

And say to them, ‘Socrates says he doesn’t understand this subject in the slightest and isn’t competent to decide which of you is right: he hasn’t been taught, or discovered for himself, anything about that kind of thing at all.’⁸

So, if it had become apparent in the course of our discussions just now that I had some knowledge of the matter which our two friends do not, it would be right to make a point of inviting me to do them this kindness; but we’ve all become equally confused.⁹ (The matter was the education of the young.)

So when I go home and (a close relative who shares the same house) hears what I have to say, he asks me if I am not ashamed of my effrontery in discussing fine occupations, when questioning shows how obviously ignorant I am even about what fineness itself is.¹⁰

For what I say is always the same - that I know not the truth in these affairs: ...¹¹

⁶ *Phd.* 97c

⁷ *Ap.* 21d

⁸ *La.* 186d

⁹ *La.* 200e

¹⁰ *HMa.* 304d

¹¹ *G.* 509a

Socrates said he did not know where the argument should go.¹² If the argument was built on general opinions and conclusions from other arguments, he should have been able to remember them and he would have been dishonest in saying he did not. He was not against using old arguments if they were appropriate. In *Alkibiades* he was willing to use an old argument because it would achieve what he wanted it to, but Alkibiades wanted a new one.

What a way you have! When you make a mistake which might be refuted by a previous argument, you insist on having a new and different refutation; the old argument is a worn-out garment which you will no longer put on, but someone must produce another which is clean and new.¹³

But in the examination they seemed to be of no use. Old arguments applied to a specific context of time and place, a new context required a new examination.

Socrates himself and those who knew him claimed he was honest. At his trial he blamed his charges on his honesty. "And yet I know that this plainness of speech makes them hate me, and what is their hatred but a proof that I am speaking the truth?"¹⁴ Phaedo said he was, "our friend; concerning whom we may truly say that of all the men of his time whom we have known, he was the wisest and justest and best."¹⁵ We have to accept that he had concluded he did not know the answers to the questions, that is, he had no prior knowledge of the answers. For Socrates, that neither he nor anyone else could have any knowledge in these affairs became a statement of fact.

Many writers have considered this disavowal of knowledge to be "Socratic irony," believing Socrates said he had no knowledge in order to trick others into participating in the investigation. Other writers have put forward different theories. One group sees the statement as irony, and therefore dishonest. "Socrates seems prepared to employ any kind of deception in order to get people into this *elenchus*."¹⁶ This group argues that Socrates acts contrary to his own apparent belief that honesty is to be valued in order to get people to examine themselves; that the end is more important than the means. Robinson describes what he does as "insincere." He believes that Socrates intends from the start to refute whatever answer is put forward, and that he also knows the outcome

¹² *Eu.* 5a, 15c, 15e. *Ap.* 20c, 21d, 23b. *Ch.* 165b, 166c. *La.* 186b, 186d, 200e. *Ly.* 212a, 223b. *Me.* 71a, 80d

¹³ *Alk.* 113a

¹⁴ *Ap.* 24a

¹⁵ *Phd.* 118a

¹⁶ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 10

of the refutation well ahead of time, despite saying differently. He is always looking for a way to prove the person's "thesis is false; and if the answerer refuses to grant him a premise he keeps the conversation going somehow until he has thought of another starting-point which the answerer will admit and which will serve to refute him."¹⁷

The statements that he is 'seeing whether the answer is true' are untrue. ... So are the earnest requests for instruction by which he obtains the primary answer. So are his occasional invitations to reciprocity in *elenchus*. ... Insincere also is the pose of suffering from bad memory. ... In the *Meno* it is a way to entrap Meno into pontificating, so that he can be refuted."¹⁸

Socrates' claim not to know was only a ruse to trick people into joining his investigation. The argument is that Socrates did know, and to say the opposite was to be dishonest. It is not possible to arrive at virtuous results by unvirtuous means.

A second group attempts to define and explain the problem away. It focuses on whether Socrates could truthfully state that he did not have knowledge. If he could, his actions agree with his words. This group argues that Socrates meant knowledge in the form of justified true beliefs. Since the method he was supposed to have used, the *elenchus*, could only indicate which beliefs are false, he could never be sure of what is true. Furthermore, even beliefs that seem to be true could later be proved false in the light of new information, or a further examination.¹⁹ "When (Socrates) renounces 'knowledge' he is telling us that the question of the truth of anything *he* believes can always be sensibly re-opened; that any conviction he has stands ready to be re-examined in the company of any sincere person who will raise the question and join him in the investigation."²⁰ The argument of this group relies on Socrates using the *elenchus*.

A third group accepts the statement exactly as it is; Socrates saying he had no knowledge means he did not know the answers to the questions he asked. For this reason he had nothing to give to the examination, and he had no idea of where the examination would go, or how it should get there. "So-called Socratic teachers typically ask their questions and lead their students to the right answers precisely because they do know their subjects and, hence, do know the right answers to their questions."²¹ This

¹⁷ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 80

¹⁸ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 8

¹⁹ Vlastos, G. (1991) p. 10

²⁰ Vlastos, G. (1971) p. 10

²¹ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 3

group states this is different from what Socrates actually did; neither the teacher nor the student knows what the answer should be²² and both are discovering together.

No doubt because (Socrates) does not regard himself as having the knowledge of wisdom he would need to guide students in the relevant way, Socrates often explicitly denies that he is a teacher or that he has any knowledge to teach. It may be, of course, that this is irony, a part of Socrates' strategy as a teacher. But, if so, it is again odd that we never see Socrates come out from under this alleged cover of strategic irony and that we never see his students completely succeed in learning the 'lesson' Socrates is allegedly teaching.²³

The evidence suggests that Socrates was being honest when he said he had no knowledge in the area he was investigating. He did not know so he had to ask. The method will have to reflect this. The type of questions will need to be those that ~~can~~ only the interlocutor can answer, and this has to be done truthfully for the examination to be worthwhile.

Socrates Never Taught

Socrates said at his trial that he never taught anyone anything, and "if you have heard from any source that I undertake to educate men and exact money for it (like the sophists), that also is untrue."²⁴ He went to some pains to impress this point. He did not consider what he was doing openly to be teaching, nor did he take certain students aside and teach them wisdom privately. "But throughout my life, both in any public action and in private, you will find that I have been immutably the same, ..." ²⁵ "Anyone may listen to my words ... (but) I never taught him anything. And if anyone says that he has ever learned or heard anything from me in private which all the world has not heard, ... he is speaking an untruth."²⁶ This is difficult to accept when he seemed to be teaching people how to live well. However, if he believed he had no knowledge of his own he would have believed he had nothing to teach. Having nothing to teach is different from not teaching anything. A lot depends on what teaching means.

²² Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 3

²³ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 4

²⁴ *Ap.* 19d

²⁵ *Ap.* 33a

²⁶ *Ap.* 33b

In Socrates' day teaching appears to have been considered the transfer of information and skills from the teacher to the student. Having nothing to transfer, he could not consider himself a teacher, and not being a teacher, he could not accept money for what it was he did.²⁷ However, if teaching is defined as helping or facilitating someone to discover knowledge, this is exactly what Socrates did. Through the investigation, both he and the person being questioned jointly discovered how to live, which is more important than any other. "A man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong - acting the part of a good man or of a bad."²⁸ "Acting the part" by taking good actions.

Socrates could not know what the person's opinions were, so he had to ask, and from this asking the person discovers something about his beliefs. The method Socrates used is not a teaching method in terms of the transfer of information, but it is a teaching method in terms of discovering knowledge.

Characteristics of the Examination

So far, the evidence is that Socrates was focused on how to act, he had no knowledge in the area he was examining, and he was not teaching in the traditional sense because he believed he had nothing to teach. This indicates that the method examines actions, it does not rely on the questioner knowing the area being examined, and it is not a teaching method (in the traditional sense). We can now begin to look at the characteristics of the method. From Socrates' statements, a fairly clear picture of this method emerges. I have quoted from the Earlier *Dialogs* those passages that appear to indicate most clearly what he was doing.

Cross-Examination

Socrates said several times that he cross-examined those who thought they had wisdom.

The young men who follow me uninvited ... enjoy hearing people cross-examined, and they often of their own accord imitate me and attempt to cross-examine others.²⁹

²⁷ Ap. 31b

²⁸ Ap. 28b

²⁹ Ap. 23c

But why do certain people enjoy spending most time with me? ... It is because they enjoy hearing the cross-examination of those who think themselves wise when they are not: and it really is diverting.³⁰

Now this duty of cross-examining other men has been imposed upon me by god
...³¹

What does cross-examination mean? In law it can mean to test a person's story or version of an event by asking questions to check that statements made are consistent. Cross-examination can be used to check that a person's story holds up by seeking a cohesive and consistent whole without contradictions; to check by questioning whether a person is speaking the truth and check whether subsequent answers either support or contradict the original statement. This definition appears to agree with what Socrates was doing. He seems to be checking by cross-examination whether a person's beliefs about a particular action agree and remain consistent with other beliefs they hold of what is best.

Not Unique

The method was not unique, anyone could do it. Special skills, aptitude or knowledge were not necessary.

It is also clear that Socrates does not regard his own ability to examine people as unique. Already there are young men who are able to imitate him and get similar results (Ap. 23c), and Socrates is convinced that after he has been executed, there will continue to be others who can do what he has done (Ap. 39c).³²

Experience Not Necessary

Socrates indicates that experience is also not necessary. A person can perform the method after only watching him. They did not need to have the method explained to them, they did not need to learn anything, nor did they need to practice in order to be able to use it.

Socrates also makes it quite clear that one does not need experience in order to make use of the *elenchus*. Instead, Socrates exhorts one and all to lead examined lives; and even young and inexperienced men can examine others and reveal

³⁰ Ap. 33c

³¹ Ap. 33c (Jowett version)

ignorance (see Ap. 23c). Thus, although Socrates' remarkable ability to reduce his interlocutors to perplexity is no doubt bolstered by experience, it is not itself what Socrates calls 'experience,' nor does it have 'experience' as a necessary or sufficient condition.³³

For comparison, the following passage is an example of the type of reasoning and argument that is precluded by this condition and therefore not Socrates'.

One does not see it, therefore, because it is a thing seen, but on the contrary it is a thing seen because one sees it: not does one lead it because it is a thing led, but it is a thing led because one leads it: nor does one carry it because it is a thing carried, but it is a thing carried because one carries it. Is what I wish to say clear, Euthyphro? What I mean is this, that, if a thing is produced or affected, it is a thing produced because it is produced; not produced because it is a thing produced; and it is not affected because it is a thing affected; it is a thing affected because it is affected. Do you not agree?³⁴

This is not to say that Socrates could not, or did not, explain in this way, only that it is not the method of the cross-examination.

Unplanned

Socrates states that he had an unplanned style of speech, and presumably he cross-examined in the same manner, with an unplanned method.

You shall hear from me the whole truth ... (in) words uttered as they occur to me in the language of every day ... if you hear me making my defence in the language that I regularly employ at the counters in the market place, where many of you have heard me, and else where ...³⁵

Remember, gentlemen, not to interrupt if I converse in my usual fashion.³⁶

He seemed to know what he wanted to do and just kept at it until he achieved it. He did whatever he felt was appropriate to the situation. Brickhouse and Smith suggest that a craftsman does not go about his business 'at random' or by conjecture. He is guided by

³² Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 8

³³ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 9

³⁴ *Eu.* 10b

³⁵ *Ap.* 17c

³⁶ *Ap.* 27a

knowledge, his method is orderly, the results of his craft are regular and orderly. But, Socrates only seemed to have some 'rules of thumb' and he plainly would not regard these as "sufficient to elevate his style of philosophizing to the status of craft."³⁷ In other words, his method did not have the attributes of a craft. It was unplanned and only guided by what he was aiming to do;

Question and Answer

The evidence suggests the method Socrates used consists of asking questions. Answering the questions truthfully is one of his conditions for participation.

If anybody thinks that Socrates, though excellent at setting people on the road to goodness, was incapable of leading them to their goal, I invite him to consider not only the way in which Socrates used to question and refute (by way of correction) those who thought they knew everything.³⁸

... but anyone, whether he be rich or poor, may ask and answer me and listen to my words ...³⁹

Answer my questions - that is all⁴⁰

Socrates, speaking of himself in the second person says, "Socrates, do not marvel at what we say, but answer, since you habitually use the method of question and answer."⁴¹ Because he had no knowledge of his own and because he had nothing to teach, asking questions is all that is left. This excludes any method that expounds, or guides, or works from a difference of opinion to a synthesis. Socrates also had no position to defend and was not interested in winning or losing the argument. In fact, there was no argument to win because there was only one side. This idea of arguing to win at all costs was popular with the sophists and was called eristic, but Socrates explicitly states this is not what he did. He was quite willing to accept whichever way the argument went.

³⁷ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 7

³⁸ *Xen. Mem. I*, 4, 1-3

³⁹ *Ap.* 33b

⁴⁰ *Alk.* 114e

⁴¹ *Cr.* 50c

Questions About Opinions

Based on the evidence so far, Socrates must have asked about something only the interlocutors knew; their opinions. This has been covered above. Another person's opinions are something that cannot be known without asking, no matter how wise the person asking is. Everyone has different opinions and the only way of knowing what they are for sure is by asking. Everything else is only a guess - or as Socrates would say - an opinion. In this case; opinions of opinions; the only condition being to state truthfully what they are.

By the god of friendship, Callicles! Don't think that you can play games with me and answer whatever comes to your head, contrary to your real opinion ...⁴²

Don't answer contrary to your real opinion, so we may get somewhere.⁴³

Euthyphro: Call it trafficking, if that is the name you prefer to give it.

Socrates: I do not prefer it, unless it happens to be true.⁴⁴

If you agree with these things, Crito, watch out that you are not doing so contrary to your real opinion.⁴⁵

I won't have this. For it isn't this 'if you wish' and 'if you think so' that I want to be refuted, but you and me. I say 'you and me' for I think that the thesis is best refuted if you take the 'if' out of it.⁴⁶

But consider now whether you are satisfied with the starting-point of our inquiry, and try to answer my question in accordance with your true convictions.⁴⁷

The person being questioned had to give those opinions he believed to be true. This included generally accepted opinions, but only if he agreed with them. This was necessary if the examination was to 'work.' If the answers to the questions were not believed, or were hypothetical,⁴⁸ the result would carry no weight. Socrates could not know what the other person's opinions were, and he could not judge them right or

⁴² *G.* 500b

⁴³ *Rep I.* 346a

⁴⁴ *Eu.* 14e

⁴⁵ *Cr.* 49c

⁴⁶ *Pr.* 331c

⁴⁷ *Cr.* 48e

⁴⁸ Vlastos, G. (1983) p. 35

wrong because he did not know himself in the particular context. All he wanted was the person to truthfully state their opinions.

Opinions of Results

The opinions Socrates seems to be asking for in the cross-examination are those of which actions the person considers best, and why. The answers will often be in terms of the expected results and because they are what the person desires.

One example of opinions is in *Laches*. Should a person do military training? This is the question two fathers considering their sons' education ask Socrates. The opinion put forward by Nikias is that military training is good, based on the results.

Nikias makes a number of points in favor of military training, which he believes (a) promotes physical fitness, (b) prepares a man for the military duties of a citizen, (c) gives one the edge over unskilled opponents, (d) promotes an interest in military science, (e) makes one braver, and (f) encourages a soldierly appearance.⁴⁹

Laches counters with his opinion against military training.

Laches argues that there is little point in taking a course in military training as (a) the foremost military power in Greece, Sparta, has no truck with it; (b) *experience suggests* that the instructors themselves do not profit from their knowledge; and (c) it could only *cause* a coward to take foolish risks, and make a brave man into the butt of criticism.⁵⁰

It seems that people's opinions of which results to expected from which actions are arrived at from the experience they have had. If A is done, B is the result. A conclusion is made from this experience and the same result will be expected next time A is done. People experience events differently, as in the case of witnesses to an accident. Each person has a different story. Once the conclusion has been made, this is the way the person will view the world, and usually only the evidence that reinforces the opinion is accepted in the future. It may be a wrong conclusion - whatever this means, but Socrates cannot know this unless he examines the original experience and tries to deny it, and this is something he cannot do. All he can do is use the opinions a person has to lead to a contradiction, and to the realization that he does not know.

⁴⁹ Saunders, T.J. Ed. (1987) p. 87

Best Results

Everyone has opinions of what the consequences of specific actions will be and whether these are the best. Socrates was interested in what the person considered the best results to be. He believed that people (and everything else) do what they consider to be in their best interests, and whatever this is, it will be best for them.

Mind is the disposer and cause of all things: ... and I reflected that, if this were so, then Mind in ordering all things must order and arrange them in the best possible way. If then one wished to discover the cause why anything comes into being or passes ways or exists, he will have to discover how it is best for that thing to exist or to act or be acted upon in any way: and the conclusion from this argument was that a man ought to take account only of what is best and most fitting both for himself and for everything else.⁵¹

The aim of the examination is to have people state what they believe their best interests are, and if the actions are going to bring them about.

If anyone should say that I could not have done what seemed right to me without such things as bones and sinews and the like, that would be quite correct: but to say that these things, and not my choice of what is best, are the causes of my action, and that too though I act with intelligence, would be a very loose and idle way of talking.⁵²

Socrates cannot judge whether the results the person considers best are actually best because he does not know himself. He has to accept whatever conclusion is reached in terms of the results and consequences and whether these are desirable or not. Only the person himself knows this. What appears best for one person may not be for another.

How One Ought to Live

Socrates' argument appears to be that discovering which actions will bring the best results will indicate how one ought to live.

Our argument is over no chance matter but over what is the way we ought to live.⁵³

⁵⁰ Saunders, T.J. Ed. (1987) p. 88

⁵¹ *Phd.* 97c

⁵² *Phd.* 99a

⁵³ *Rep I.* 352d

Of all inquiries, Callicles, this is the noblest - about those things on which you reproached me: what sort of man should one be, and what should one practice and up to what point, when he is young and when he is old.⁵⁴

For the things we are disputing are hardly trivial, but, as one might say, those which to come to know is noblest and not to know most base. For their sum and substance is just this: knowing, or not knowing, who is happy and who is not.⁵⁵

You seem not to know that whenever anyone comes face to face with Socrates and has a conversation with him, what invariably happens is that, although they may have started on a completely different subject at first, Socrates will keep heading him off as they're talking until he has him trapped into giving an account of his present life-style, and of the way he has spent his life in the past. And once he has him trapped, Socrates won't let him go before he has well and truly cross-examined him on every angle. ... I enjoy his company ... and I don't think there's anything wrong in suggesting that we haven't acted properly in the past, or that we're not doing so now. On the contrary, you're bound to be more careful about your way of life in future if you don't shrink from this treatment, ...⁵⁶

The aim of the method is to indicate which actions will bring the best results or consequences.

Did Not Know the Answers

If Socrates could not know the answers to his questions, his method could not have been the type Plato presents. If Socrates had only been looking for definitions of virtue, he would have remembered conclusions from previous arguments, or he would have indicated how far the argument got the last time, or with another person, and continue from there. He did not do this.

I'll be the first to explain my position, then, Lysimaches and Melesias, and I may say I've not had any instruction on the subject (of education), although it's true that it has been a passionate interest of mine ever since I was a boy. But I've never been able to pay fees to the sophists - the only ones who professed to be able to

⁵⁴ G. 487e

⁵⁵ G. 472c

⁵⁶ La. 187e

make a good and honest man of me - and I can't discover the art for myself even now.⁵⁷

And the most charming thing about my craft is that I am skillful in my own despite.⁵⁸

Whereas I'm so far from acquiring (a friend) that I don't even know how one man becomes the friend of another. That's what I want to ask you about, in view of your experience.⁵⁹

However, I did say, just as they were leaving, 'Lysis and Menexenus, we've now made utter fools of ourselves, an old man like me and you, since these people will go away and say that we think that we're friends of one another - for I consider myself one of your number - though we were not as yet able to find out precisely what a friend is.'⁶⁰

You see, my friend, I was recently plunged into confusion when, during a discussion in which I was condemning some things as contemptible but praising others as fine, I was rudely interrupted with a question which went somewhat as follows: 'Socrates,' I was asked, 'what makes you an expert on what sorts of things are fine and contemptible? I mean, could you tell me what fineness is?' now, I'm not up to this kind of thing, so I got confused and couldn't make a proper reply.⁶¹

You must think I am singularly fortunate, to know whether virtue can be taught or how it is acquired. The fact is that far from knowing whether it can be taught, I have no idea what virtue itself is.⁶²

So with virtue now. I don't know what it is.⁶³

⁵⁷ *La.* 187c

⁵⁸ *Eu.* 11d

⁵⁹ *Ly.* 212a

⁶⁰ *Ly.* 223b

⁶¹ *HMa.* 286c

⁶² *Me.* 71a

⁶³ *Me.* 80d

Examining for Own Benefit

Socrates says he was doing the examination as much for himself as for the other person. He also wanted to know what the outcome would be.

But, Critias, you're treating me as if I'm maintaining that I know what I'm asking about, and as if I'll agree with you if I really want to. But it's not like that. In fact, I'm going along with you in investigating whatever proposition is made, because I myself am in ignorance. So, when I've considered it, I'm prepared to tell you whether or not I agree with you. But wait until I've considered it.⁶⁴

How can you believe that if I am trying my hardest to refute you, I'm doing it for any other reason than that for which I'd investigate what I say myself! You see, my great fear is that I may some time not notice that I'm thinking I know something when in fact I don't. And this, I tell you, is what I'm doing now: looking at the argument mostly for my own sake, but perhaps for the sake of my friends as well. Or don't you think that it is a common good for almost all men that each thing that exists should be revealed as it really is?⁶⁵

Then, my wonderful friend, the best thing for me to do is to become your pupil and challenge Meletus on these very points ...⁶⁶

Then either we were wrong in our previous agreement or, if it was right, we are wrong now.⁶⁷

You leave me after dashing the fine hope I had of learning from you what is holy and not, and ridding myself of Meletus' prosecution by pointing out to him that I have learnt wisdom about things divine from Euthyphro, that I am no longer in my ignorance making reckless judgements or innovations in these matters, that that *I shall lead a better life* in the future.⁶⁸

The conclusion would be new to him because of a new context, time and place. As mentioned above, this means that he could not have been asking about virtues and definitions, but the only thing he could not know; the other person's opinions, especially his opinions about the actions he has taken in the past, or the ones he is contemplating in

⁶⁴ Ch. 165b

⁶⁵ Ch. 166c

⁶⁶ Eu. 5a

⁶⁷ Eu 15c

the present. The aim appears to be that as a result of doing the examination both Socrates and the interlocutor will know if the action is the best in the circumstances. This knowledge will not help them next time when the circumstances will be different, but it will lead to a better life as the result of this one action. The experience of this one time will hopefully entice them to do it again, and to continue take those actions that lead to a better life.

The Destination of the Examination

Since Socrates could not know where the examination would take him; his only task appears to be to make sure the argument remains valid. As stated above, he could not use conclusions from previous examinations to guide him, but experience from previous examinations would have helped him do them more quickly or more effectively, he would get better at knowing which question to ask. This idea contradicts Robinson who believes that Socrates does know where the examination should go, what the conclusion will be, and guides it there.

When he says of an answer 'Well, that is good enough' (G. 498a), he gives away the fact that, though the answerer has not admitted as much as he expected, he has admitted enough for his downfall. In reality Socrates is always doing what he does openly in Republic I 348-9, looking for a way to persuade the answerer that his thesis is false: and if the answerer refuses to grant him a premise he keeps the conversation going somehow until he has thought of another starting-point which that answerer will admit and which will serve to refute him.⁶⁹

The quote Robinson is referring to appears more to indicate that the person has stated his opinion clearly and there is no need to elaborate.

Socrates: And which feels more pain or pleasure, the sensible or the fool?

Callicles: I do not think there is much difference.

Socrates: That is quite enough. ...⁷⁰

After all, Socrates is asking for opinions, and the way he has phrased the question only requires a short answer. A longer answer would not improve the effectiveness of the examination, it would only make it take longer. "That is quite enough," probably meant

⁶⁸ Eu. 15e

⁶⁹ Robinson, R. (1953) p. 9

⁷⁰ G. 498a

“you have answered my question sufficiently for us to move on to the next question.”
 “You do not need to say more - you have said you believe there is no difference between how the sensible and the fool feel pain or pleasure.”

Acceptance of the Conclusion of The Examination

The method appears to be such that Socrates has to accept the conclusion, even if he does not like it. Providing the person being questioned gives true statements of opinions as premises, there can be no other acceptable conclusion than the one that is arrived at.

Socrates: Then, Hippias, he who voluntarily does wrong and disgraceful things, if there be such a man, must be the good man?

Hippias: There I cannot agree with you.

Socrates: Nor can I agree with myself, Hippias; and yet that seems to be the conclusion which, as far as we can see at present, must follow from our argument.⁷¹

So now, Lysis and Menexenus, we've done it! We've discovered what a friend is and what it is not. ... then, unaccountably, a most absurd suspicion came into my head that what we'd agreed was not true, ...⁷²

The Premises

The premises are not tested for truth-value because they are not objectively true statements. These types of statements do not seem possible with the method Socrates was using. The opinions only had to be believed to be true by the person. The premises were not checked, but accepted as true, and, providing the argument is valid, the conclusion must also be true - for the interlocutor. This also means the argument cannot be redone with different premises if the conclusion is not acceptable. There is only one set of premises the person can use, those that he believes to be true, and these have already been used.

It is also plain that Socrates does not always accept the truth of the premises he uses. For example, in the *Euthyphro* Socrates employs Euthyphro's belief that the gods quarrel and disagree - a premise about which he has already expressed skepticism ...⁷³

⁷¹ *HMi.* 376b

⁷² *Ly.* 218c

⁷³ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 15

All Socrates can infer from those cases in which both he and his interlocutor agree about the premises is that *they* regard the conclusion as being true.⁷⁴

Far from relying on premises that are either endoxical or self-evident, Socrates tells Polus in the *Gorgias* (472b) that in fact he needs only one witness - the interlocutor himself - to establish the premises Socrates uses in his arguments. Whether others would share the same beliefs is of no consequence whatever (see also *Cr.* 49d).⁷⁵

To redo the argument with different premises would be asking the person to use premises he does not believe to be true. This shows the importance of the person stating only those opinions he believes to be true. This also explains Socrates continual emphasis on this point by asking the person if he is sure he wants to use the opinions he has put forward and if he wants to change them. The more strongly the person believes the opinions he puts forward, the more he will have to agree with the conclusion that he comes to.

Past Actions

It appears that Socrates was able to examine past and present actions with his method. Nikias says as much in the quote from *Laches*:

... whenever anyone comes face to face with Socrates ... what invariably happens is that ... Socrates will keep heading him off as they're talking until he has him trapped into giving an account of his present life-style, and of the way he has spent his life in the past.⁷⁶

In the past, certain actions had been taken because the person believed they were the best, but what were the results, what happened? Were they the best in terms of the best results, or would another action have been better? The outcome of examining past actions indicates to the person that what was believed to be best was only an opinion, and the actual results show whether this was right or not. By examining past actions and coming to the conclusion that they should not have been taken because the expected and actual results are different, and that this can be deduced rationally, a person may be more inclined to examine proposed actions in the future.

⁷⁴ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 15

⁷⁵ Brickhouse, T.C. and Smith, N.D. (1994) p. 15

Self-Conviction

Another consequence of the question and answer method appears to be self-conviction.

Socrates: See how inaccurately you speak in saying that I say so.

Did I not ask the questions and you answer them?

Then, who is speaking? I who put the question, or you who answer me?

Now let us put the case generally; whenever there is a question and answer, who is the speaker - the questioner or the answerer?

Alkibiades: I should say, Socrates, that the answerer was the speaker.

Socrates: Think that you have heard all this 'from yourself, and not from me,' and that I am not to blame for it.⁷⁶

Socrates: I shall take the liberty of proving to you the opposite of that which you will not prove to me.

Answer my questions - that is all

Alkibiades: Nay, I should like you to be the speaker.

Socrates: What, do you not wish to be thoroughly persuaded?

Alkibiades: Certainly I do.

Socrates: And can you be persuaded better than out of your own mouth?

Alkibiades: I think not.

Socrates: Then you shall answer; and if you do not hear the words, that the just is the expedient, coming from your own lips, never believe another man again.⁷⁷

In *Alkibiades*, Socrates gives self-conviction as the reason for using the question and answer method. A person can be told he does not know because he cannot know anything, but will often not believe it. He has to be led to the realization and this will only be as a result of the strongest possible persuasion. Only the person can truly convince himself of this. If someone else tries, it rests on the strength of the argument, but a person cannot argue with a conclusion that his own reasoned approach has reached from his own ^{to his} believed opinions. Much of the hostility towards Socrates appeared to come from people becoming angry with conclusions and contradictions they could not counter, but the logos led to the conclusion.

⁷⁶ La. 187e

⁷⁷ Alk. 112e

⁷⁸ Alk 114e

The Reaction to the Conclusion

There were several reactions to the conclusion of the examination, not all of them good. People became bewildered and angry, often from the discovery of contradictory beliefs they held. Meno says that he felt as if he had been stung by a flat sting-ray:

Socrates, even before I met you they told me that in plain truth you are a perplexed man yourself and reduce others to perplexity. At this moment I feel you are exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell until I am just a mass of helplessness. ... you are exactly like the flat sting-ray that one meets in the sea. Whenever anyone comes into contact with it, it numbs him.⁷⁹

Euthyphro became annoyed:

Well, Socrates, I do not know how to explain to you what I think. Somehow or other whatever we put forward goes round in circles and refuses to stay where we put it.⁸⁰

Alkibiades complained of a headache:

I solemnly declare, Socrates, that I do not know what I am saying. Verily, I am in a strange state, for when you put questions to me I am of different minds in successive instants.⁸¹

These reactions seem to be the result of a person discovering contradictions between opinions and actions. They intend to take the actions they believe to be best, but based on their answers to Socrates' questions, from an argument that uses only their own words, beliefs and opinions, and from the conclusion based on these, they discover that the results are going to be harmful.

The Actual Method

The evidence presented above indicates that a method can be identified. To summarize:

1. Moral philosophy The method examines actions to discover which are right and wrong.

⁷⁹ *Me.* 79e

⁸⁰ *Eu.* 11b

⁸¹ *Alk.* 116e

2. No knowledge	The method does not rely on the questioner having knowledge in the area being examined.
3. No teaching	The method does not involve a transfer of knowledge, although it does appear to be a way of learning through discovering.
4. Cross-examination	The method asks questions in a way that tests consistency and indicates contradictions.
5. Not unique	The method can be used by anyone.
6. Experience unnecessary	The method does not have to be practiced or taught.
7. Unplanned style	The method does not appear to have a specific sequence of steps.
8. Question and answer	The method relies on asking questions and having the other person answer truthfully.
9. Questions about opinions	The method asks questions about the other person's opinions of right and wrong actions or behavior.
10. Opinions of expected results of actions	The method asks specifically about the other person's opinions of the expected results or consequences of a specific action in a specific context.
11. Best results	The method is looking for answers to indicate the best results.
12. How one ought to live	The method is concerned with how one ought to live, that is, which actions should be taken in living the best life.
13. Socrates did not know the answers	The type of questions used in the method are those that the questioner cannot know the answer to without asking; the other person's opinions.
14. Examining for own benefit	Since each examination is specific to the context, Socrates was just as interested as the other person in discovering if the action would be best.
15. Outcome of the examination unknown	The examination could lead anywhere, depending on the other person's opinions, and these had to be accepted as valid statements.
16. Conclusion had to be accepted	The conclusion is valid providing the other person gives answers he believes to be true. If it is valid, Socrates has to accept it.
17. Premises not tested for truth-value	The premises are opinions based on experience. It is not possible to convince a person that he has experienced something wrongly.
18. Past actions examined	The method can be used to examine past actions, as well as present ones.

19. Self-conviction	The question and answer method means that the person is convinced by his own argument and premises.
20. Reaction to the conclusion	The method indicated contradictory beliefs in a way that could not be denied. This led to negative reactions due to inner confusion.

Based on the statements, the proposed method is that Socrates first asks people to give reasons why they are taking, or have taken, a particular action. People usually answer that they have chosen the specific actions because they believe it will bring the best results. He then examined the action by asking people to give their reasons for taking the action.

Of the two possible types of answers to these questions, the first is in terms of **expected consequences**, the second is in terms of **general statements**. Socrates appears to have used a different method with each type. The method Socrates uses with the first set is to look at the consequences. How exactly does he do this?

He starts by asking the person to say why he believes he is taking the right action. The person says naturally because it is the best. Socrates then says that if it is the best, it will have the best results. The person agrees. This should be examined so Socrates asks what these expected results are, to make sure they are in fact the best. The person also agrees to this. And so the examination proceeds. Socrates asking for reasons and expected results and consequences, and the person answering truthfully.

However, it is important to consider all the results and it is possible the person has not done this. This is what is often missed. It is possible that the person (1) has not considered the results at all and is only repeating an opinion of which action is best, or (2) has not taken into account enough of the consequences, or (3) has considered the wrong consequences, or (4) has considered only what the generally accepted consequences are, or (5) has not considered the consequences of the consequences. These all need to be examined and Socrates does this by continuing to ask questions. The examination is to make sure all these possibilities have been considered. Only then can a rational decision be made as to whether the action is best. If it is not, another action should be chosen and examined.

Conclusion

To conclude, if Socrates' statements can be accepted as reliable, they indicate his method is to examine people to discover if the actions they have taken or are taking are the best. People believe they are, but often the examination, based on asking for expected consequences of actions and other consequences, shows that they are not. The examination causes contradictions between actions and opinions, or between opinions and opinions to become apparent. The action that is initially believed to be best is discovered to lead to results that are not best and this is how a person discovers he does not know what he thought he did.

The examination itself appears to start with simply asking why. The person states which actions are believed best and then discovers if this is so. When people discover that their opinions are wrong they may become angry at the conclusion, but they have convinced themselves. Socrates only asked the questions, but he was often blamed for the results. There is nothing the person said that they did not believe, and therefore they have no counter-argument. They must accept that what they imagined to be correct before the examination is not, and often for reasons they would normally not have considered. The aim of the examination is moral, to indicate how to live well. The method of the examination is rational. Hopefully, as a result being examined by Socrates, the person will copy the method and continue to examine actions.

Section 5: Examination of General Statements

Summary

Sometimes, in answer to Socrates' questions, people gave general statements to justify their actions. They answer in terms of the result of a specific action, but with a statement that actually says what they believe the results of an action should be. For example; a person should always help a friend, or it is best to learn from one who knows. These general statements cannot be rejected and need to be tested. To do this, Socrates would cross-examine a few specific examples based on the general statement. If the examples indicate that the results of following these general statements would be best, then they are considered worthwhile. Unfortunately, general statements do not examine, nor indicate the specific action to be taken, only the aim. But, once the person knows what to aim at they may find it easier to decide which action may best achieve it. They still, however, need to choose one specific action and examine it to discover if it is best.

Introduction

People appear to have given Socrates 'general statements' as justification for why they thought the intended action was best. There are not many obvious examples in the *Dialogs* of Socrates examining these, and when he does they appear tangential to the main focus of the definition and the elenctic examination of virtues. However, general statements can be found throughout the *Dialogs*, and Socrates needs to deal with them in some way that would bring the focus back to individual actions that could be examined to indicate how to live.

The following imaginary dialog illustrates how easily general statements may be put forward:

Socrates:	Why are you taking this action?
Person:	Because I believe it is the best
Socrates:	Why is it the best?
Person:	Because these types of action are always the best, or because a person should always take this particular action.

This section looks at what these general statements are and how Socrates appears to have dealt with them. In the *Dialogs*, Plato usually has Socrates continue his line of

questioning until a virtue and its definition becomes the focus. This ignores specific actions and general statements. However, there are numerous smaller examples of general statements being examined that Plato has Socrates use as analogies.

General Statements

General statements appear to be a definition of an action, but in fact describe a result. Euthyphro was taking what he believed to be a pious action in charging his father with murder. In fact, what he was really doing was taking an action that he believed would have a pious result. The only problem with this is that he could not define piety and so he could not say if his action was going to be able to bring it about. General statements cannot indicate whether a particular action is the best one to take or not. They can only indicate if the aim of the action is worthwhile.

General statements are usually the accepted opinions of 'the many' (hoi polloi). Some brief examples of general statements:

- It is best to examine an action before taking it.
- A person should always stand when someone enters the room.
- A gentleman always opens a door for a lady.

The following are more specific examples from the *Dialogs*. In each example the general statement is a clear moral principle or injunction that the person believes should be followed. In many case the statement is that the intended action is of a type that is not considered good or honorable.

I should not, they say, concern myself about such a creature, for it is an unholy action for son to prosecute father for murder. Little they know about heaven's attitude to what is holy or unholy.¹

Holiness I describe as doing just what I am now doing. It is to prosecute the man who is guilty of acts of murder of sacrilege, or any other such offences,²

Observe what conclusive proof I can offer to you that this is [heaven's] law ... the law that we should never give way to the impious man, no matter who he may be.³

¹ *Eu.* 4d

² *Eu.* 5d

³ *Eu.* 5e

But I believe, Socrates, that all the gods would be agreed as to the propriety of punishing a murderer; there would be no difference of opinion about that. (Jowett version)⁴

But where shame is, there fear is also: for surely no one who feels reverence or shame about any thing does not at the same time dread and fear a repute for baseness.⁵

While there is always right where there is holiness, there is not everywhere holiness where there is right: since the holy is part of the right.⁶

Isn't it plain to everyone that a man is not taught anything except knowledge?⁷

We were correct, were we not, in agreeing that good men must be profitable or useful? It cannot be otherwise, can it?⁸

And is not the same person able to persuade one individual singly, and an assembly, of the things which he knows? The grammarian, for example, can persuade one man about letters, and he can persuade many.⁹

All just things are honorable.¹⁰

How did Socrates Handle General Statements?

Socrates could not just ignore general statements. If he gave a reason for ignoring them, it meant he had knowledge and a method. Nor could he direct the person to state only the expected results of the action, because for the person being questioned, the general statements are the expected results. What Socrates appears to have done was to examine the general statements to determine whether they were worthwhile aims.

To do this, the evidence from the *Dialogs* suggests that Socrates followed the same pattern of coming up with one or more examples of actions that the other person agreed were instances of the general statement and then examining these. For example, if the

⁴ *Eu.* 8b

⁵ *Eu.* 12b

⁶ *Eu.* 12d

⁷ *Me.* 87c

⁸ *Me.* 96e

⁹ *Alk.* 114b

general statement given is 'one should always help a friend,' he would state one instance of what appears to be helping a friend. He would get the interlocutor to agree with this. Next, he would examine the instance in his usual way, by either stating or asking for the expected results. If the results were best, the general statement would be accepted as a worthwhile aim. In some examples in the *Dialogs*, Socrates gave several instances and examined them. If three instances of the general statement lead to best results, then probably all of them will. The statement should be accepted as being worthwhile *in principle*.

Examples

There are many examples of Socrates examining these general statements, but they are not always obvious. They often appear to be asides or tangential to the main point; however, they are so frequent that they suggest it was a regular feature of what he did.

For example, Socrates several times says that a person should learn from someone who knows.¹¹ Should a person learn medicine from the physician, shoemaking from the shoemaker, or flute playing from the flute player? The obvious answer is yes. The general statement holds true in these examples and there is no reason to expect that it will not in all examples. It can be accepted as a valid statement.

Alkibiades puts forward a general statement and Socrates jumps on it. In the *Dialog* he spends some time examining the statement by presenting the facts and proves the belief to be untrue.

Alkibiades: I do not believe, however, that the Spartan generals or the great king
are really different from anybody else.

Socrates: But, my dear friend, do consider what sort of belief is this?¹²

Euthyphro states that to be holy one should be attentive to the gods. Socrates tests this with several everyday examples to see what this attention is and if the results of it are worthwhile:

We say, for example, that not every man but only the trainer of horses knows how to attend to horses, do we not? And not everybody knows how to tend dogs, but

¹⁰ *Alk.* 115a

¹¹ E.g. in *Meno*

¹² *Alk.* 115d

only the huntsman. And the herdsman's art attends to cattle. And holiness and piety pay attention to the gods, Euthyphro, is that what you say?

Now does not every form of attention achieve the same purpose? What I mean to say is, that it exists for some benefit and advantage to the object tended: you see, for example, that horses when tended by the horseman's art are profited and improved. And so too, I suppose, with dogs tended by the huntsman's art, and cattle by the herdsman's, and everything else: or do you believe that attentive care is for the harm of the object tended?

Then holiness also, being attention bestowed on the gods, benefits and improves them?¹³

Euthyphro modifies his statement from 'attention' to 'service' to the gods is piety. Socrates examines this in the same way and leads Euthyphro to state that service to the gods causes the gods to achieve many fine things.

Socrates: Now could you tell me what result the art that serves a doctor is instrumental in producing? Do you not think it is health?

What of the art which serves a shipwright? What results does it minister to produce?

Euthyphro: A ship.

Socrates: And the builder's art, I suppose, a house? What result is the art that serves the gods instrumental in producing? ... what is this splendid result which the gods achieve by using our services?

Euthyphro: Many fine things.¹⁴

People produce according to their occupations. What will people produce by their occupation of serving the gods?

Socrates: Generals produce victory in war. Farmers produce food from the soil. What is the main result of the gods' accomplishments?

Euthyphro: If a man knows how to say and to do what is acceptable to the gods, by prayer and sacrifice, that is holiness. And such conduct brings with it safety to both private households and commonwealths: but the opposite to what is acceptable is impiety, which brings utter ruin and destruction.¹⁵

¹³ *Eu.* 13b

¹⁴ *Eu.* 13d

¹⁵ *Eu.* 14a

If we want to learn something, we should go to those who know to learn.

If we wanted Meno to become a good doctor, shouldn't we send him to the doctors to be taught? And if we wanted him to become a shoemaker, to the shoemakers? And so on with the other trades?¹⁶

Before giving advice, a person should know the subject which is being deliberated.

Socrates: You do, then, mean, as I was saying, to come forward in a little while in the character of an adviser of the Athenians? ... *do you know the matter* about which they are going to deliberate, better than they?

Alkibiades: I should reply that I was going to advise them about a matter which I do know better than they.

Socrates: Then you are a good adviser about the things that you know? ... a man is a good adviser about anything, not because he has riches, but because he has knowledge? ...

Then what will be the subject of deliberation about which you will be justified in getting up and advising them?

Alkibiades: About their own concerns Socrates.

Socrates: You mean about shipbuilding, for example, when the question is what sort of ships they ought to build?

Alkibiades: No, I should not advise them about that.

Socrates: I suppose, because you do not understand shipbuilding: is that the reason?¹⁷

And further on this statement that one should learn from those who know, not from the many who only have opinions:

Socrates: But if we wanted to know not only what men are like, and what horses are like, but which men or horses have powers of running, would the many still be able to inform us?

And suppose that we wanted to know not only what men are like, but what healthy or diseased men are like - would the many be able to teach us?

Alkibiades: They would not. (Only the physicians)¹⁸

A person should not be a coward:

¹⁶ *Me.* 90b

¹⁷ *Alk.* 107b

¹⁸ *Alk.* 111e

Socrates: What would you say of courage? At what price would you be willing to be deprived of courage?

Alkibiades: I would rather die than be a coward.

Socrates: Then you think that cowardice is the worst of evils?

Alkibiades: I do.¹⁹

And finally, the statement that understanding leads to happiness:

Socrates: For if a man, my dear Alkibiades, has the power to do what he likes but has no understanding, what is likely to be the result, either to him as an individual or to the state?

For example, if he be sick and is able to do what he likes, not having the mind of a physician - having moreover tyrannical power, and no one daring to reprove him - what will happen to him? Will he not be likely to have his constitution ruined?

Or again, in a ship, if a man having the power to do what he likes, has no intelligence or skill in navigation, do you see what will happen to him and to his fellow sailors?

Alkibiades: Yes; I see that they will all perish.

Socrates: And in like manner, in a state, and whenever there is any power and authority which is wanting in virtue, will not misfortune, in like manner, ensue?

Not tyrannical power, then, my good Alkibiades, should be the aim either of individuals or states, if they would be happy, but virtue.²⁰

General Statements and the *Elenchus*

This method of examining general statements appears to be different from the *elenchus*. A general statement is only a statement of what a person believes to be best, not a definition. It is not necessary to introduce the ideas of 'virtue.' The particular virtue an action is meant to be, or its definition, is not asked for, nor needed. It is easy to see that the *elenchus* could have developed from this form of questioning; however, the *elenchus* needs more input from the person asking the questions and this contradicts statements that the method is not unique, that it is only question and answer and that experience is not necessary.

¹⁹ *Alk.* 115d

²⁰ *Alk.* 134e

With general statements Socrates did not have to deal with the apparent problem that an action may be an example of more than one virtue; for example, wisdom, honor, and courage. He was not asking for virtues to be named and then defined, he was just asking questions and when he was given a general statement, he examined it to make sure it was the best aim and therefore whether it could be a principle for future actions.

The Problem of General Statements

The general statement can be expressed as an opinion of what a person should aim at when deciding which action to take, (the desired result). The problem still remains of determining which action will bring about the desired result in each particular case and whether the action chosen will bring about the best results. A further problem is whether the best results are the same as the desired results. A desired result is only an opinion. Being desirable does not necessarily mean that it is the best. This needs to be examined in the particular context. It could be that the opinion of which result is desirable is wrong; it could in fact be harmful. This will be discovered through the examination.

Because one action can bring about different results, it is impossible to classify specific actions. This can only be done retrospectively, judging the actions from the results they bring about. For example, one specific action can be called honest or dishonest, courageous or cowardly, depending on the results. Not retreating in battle was courage and was honorable for the Greeks because it would win the battle. This was not the case for the Scythians who had a habit of fighting while retreating, and in this way winning battles.²¹ If courage wins battles, both attack for the Greeks and retreat for the Scythians can be called courageous. It is only when the battle has been won that the actions can be classified. Those actions that led to winning the battle must have been courageous, and those that led to defeat must have been cowardly. In the case of the Greeks fighting the Scythians, both attack and retreat can be considered courageous. The only way to judge is after the battle, by who won.

One action is not able to bring about the same result each time it is taken. For this reason, the general statement, "A person should always take a particular action," cannot be reliable. The person has an idea of which aim is desirable, but he still has to decide which action to take, and then check it.

²¹ La. 191a

Actions and General Statements

If it is discovered that a particular action will bring about the best results, it would be wise to take it. If it will not, then a second one should be chosen and examined. And so on, until the action that will bring about the best results is discovered. It may be that the results match the aim expressed in a general statement, but this may not always be the case. It may be discovered that a particular action based on, "A person should always do what benefits them personally." is discovered to lead to harmful consequences later on. In this case, a better action may be one with fewer personal benefits, but less harm to others. This would presumably lead to the general statement being modified. The main point is that the actual action needs to be examined to make sure it does bring about the best results, not as to whether it seems to match a general statement.

A final point is that an examination of general statements will not convince a person of the benefits of examining future actions. There would be no point. They only tell if the aim is worthwhile, and the person already believes it is. It would not indicate which action would be able to achieve it. Presumably, people would not be interested in using a method that only confirms what they know already. If there is no practical benefit, in terms of living a better life, if it will not indicate which particular action to take, there is no reason for doing it, no tangible reward in spending the time examining general statements. Only when a person is convinced of the benefits of an action will they want to take it. If they are convinced that the action of examining their opinions will lead to avoiding the harm that comes from making mistakes, they will examine.

It is easy to see how this type of answer, general statements, would lead on to discussing ideal actions and virtues and eventually definitions of virtues and arguments to derive them from first principles. But this type of examination would not achieve Socrates' aim of examining life. It would not indicate which action is best. It would not convince the person being questioned that his idea of which actions are best are only opinions and need to be examined. Aristotle says that Socrates introduced definitions, and maybe he did, but it was not a necessary part of the examination, and looking for definitions did not achieve the aim of examining life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, general statements are unavoidable and therefore have to be dealt with. They often represent generally accepted opinions and are presented by people because they are a shorthand method for choosing appropriate actions. However, because they are opinions, they still need to be examined and this can be done by examining specific examples of them. The expected conclusion is that the statements are true and this means they are worthwhile aims, but this does not indicate which action is best, or whether a proposed action should be taken or not. The action itself still needs to be examined to make sure the result it is expected to bring about is the best. The most a general statement can do is indicate the type of action that would be most appropriate.

Section 6: Examples from Two *Dialogs*

Summary

Socrates appears to have directly examined actions by asking for expected consequences and to have examined general statements by testing specific examples based on them. In both cases the aim is to determine what is best. This section presents examinations from two early *Dialogs* that give clear examples of both types. In *Crito* the direct method for examining a proposed action is used. In *Euthyphro*, the direct examination, the examination of general statements, and the *elenchus* are all present. This section indicates how Socrates' method is identifiable in the *Dialogs*.

Introduction: *Crito*

The *Dialog* begins with a statement of the action to be considered. Crito visits Socrates in jail a few days before his execution and suggests that he escape. Crito believes this is the best action under the circumstances and so do Socrates' other friends. Several of them are all willing to help, despite the danger to themselves and in fact they seem to have already made many of the arrangements.

Direct Examination of the Proposed Action

After suggesting the action, Crito gives his reasons for believing the suggested action is the best. Some of these reasons are personal, others are based on general opinion and what others will think of them if they do not act honorably and try to help their friend. All of the reasons Crito gives (between 44b and 46a) are in terms of the expected negative consequences of Socrates not escaping:

- Crito will lose a friend.
- Many will think that, while Crito might have saved Socrates if he had been willing to spend money, he did not and this will lead to a bad reputation. For what baser a reputation could a man incur than that of valuing money more than friends? The majority of people will never be persuaded that it was Socrates himself who was unwilling to escape.
- Crito imagines Socrates does not want to escape because it will cause trouble for his friends, but they are willing to fact this, and more.
- For wherever Socrates goes, if he escapes, he will be treated with kindness, and if he goes to Thessaly, Crito has friends there who will look after him.

- Socrates is abandoning his own children, and will not be able to rear and educate them.
- Socrates is choosing the laziest way and will lose his reputation of caring for goodness.
- Crito and his friends will be thought to be lacking in courage for the way the whole business has gone, from the case being brought into court, to the execution.
- The conduct Socrates is contemplating may prove not only wrong, but also dishonorable, both for him and for his friends.

Socrates' reply was that these are the opinions of the many and the action needs to be examined further looking at the positive and negative consequences of escaping. This is what he has always done in the past, often with Crito, and both agreed it was the best method. This is what he will do now.

But as to the considerations you mention about monetary expense and reputation and the rearing of children, perhaps, Crito, these are in reality the reflections of those who lightly put to death, yes and would bring men to life again without a thought, if they could, your friends the many.¹

Socrates says, if after examining the suggested action, he discovers it to be the best, he will take it. If not, then he expects Crito to accept the decision.

The examination must be done rationally. Socrates and Crito must consider all the consequences of the proposed action. Only in this way can they come to a conclusion. If a person should only do what is best for himself alone, says Socrates, "these muscles and bones of mine would long ago have been in Megara or Boeotia, borne there by *their own idea* of what was best ..." ²

Socrates then states the expected results of the action. "As a consequence of this then, consider whether in leaving the prison without the city's consent we are not doing an injury, and that too to those whom we least ought to injure: ..." ³ The results he mentions are to himself personally, to his family, to his friends, and to his city. "For consider,"

¹ Cr. 48c

² Phd. 99a

³ Cr. 49e

ask the laws of Athens, “what good will you do yourself or your friends by thus transgressing or committing any such offence?”⁴

Socrates Personally:

As for you, first of all if you go to one of the nearest cities, to Thebes or Megara, which are both well governed, you will arrive, Socrates, as an enemy to their government, and all who care for their own cities will look askance at you, considering you one who destroys the laws: ...⁵

Well then, will you avoid well-governed cities and well-disciplined men? And will life be worth living if you do?⁶

You will pass your life as a slave obsequious to one and all, and what else will you do but feast in Thessaly, as though you had journeyed thither for the sake of a dinner? And pray what will become of those discourses about justice and goodness in general?⁷

Socrates' Family:

But it is for your children's sake that you must live on, that you may rear and educate them? What? Will you take them to Thessaly to rear and educate them and make exiles of them, that they may have that too to thank you for? Or, if you will not do that, will they be brought up and educated better here in Athens if you are alive, even though you are not with them?⁸

Socrates' Friends:

It must be pretty evident that your friends too will be in danger of being exiled and deprived of their country or of losing their property; ...⁹

Socrates' City:

Socrates imagines the laws of Athens putting forward their case, that by escaping he will invalidate what he has spent his life teaching, and he will set a bad example that others may follow and that may lead to the breakdown of the laws and the city.

⁴ Cr. 53a

⁵ Cr. 53b

⁶ Cr. 53c

⁷ Cr. 53e

⁸ Cr. 54a

⁹ Cr. 53b

Tell us, Socrates, what do you propose to do? By this act which you contemplate is it not your intention to destroy us, the laws, and the whole city, as far as you can? Do you think it possible for a state still to exist and not be overturned, in which verdicts that are reached have no force but are set at naught and destroyed by private citizens?¹⁰

So that if we try to destroy you because we think it right, you to the utmost of your power will endeavor in turn to destroy us, the laws, and your fatherland, and will claim you are right in so acting, you who set up to be the true devotee of goodness?¹¹

But if you make your escape after having so basely repaid injustice with injustice and evil with evil, breaking your agreements and covenants with us and injuring those whom you least should injure, yourself and your friends, your country and ourselves, we shall be angry with you as long as you live, and there our brothers, the laws in the other world, will give you no kindly welcome: for they will know that, to the best of your power, you attempted to destroy us.¹²

Socrates' conclusion is that escaping would lead to more harm than good. Everyone concerned would be worse off. And because Socrates did not fear death, or consider it to be worse than life,¹³ he would not take an action that would lead to certain harm, when the alternative might be better. "Then, let things be, Crito: let us act as I say, since this is the path along which the god directs us."¹⁴

Introduction: Euthyphro

The *Dialog* begins with Euthyphro stating he is intending to bring charges against his father. Socrates can follow one of three options; to determine whether the action is right because it will bring the best results, whether it is right because it is what a person should do, or whether it is right because it is a pious (virtuous) action. At first Socrates asks for and is given the reasons why Euthyphro believes it is the best action, under the circumstances. These reasons are not followed up, but instead, further questioning leads to the search for a definition of piety. At a later stage in the *Dialog*, Euthyphro,

¹⁰ Cr. 50b

¹¹ Cr. 51a

¹² Cr. 54c

¹³ Ap. 40c

¹⁴ Cr. 54c

becoming desperate, offers a general statement. After a short examination this is accepted, however, Socrates wants to continue with the *elenchus*. The elenctic examination goes in circles and does not reach a conclusion. However, based on the results of the direct examination and the examination of the general statements, what Euthyphro is intending to do does appear to be best.

Direct Examination of the Intended Action

Socrates, on his way to answer the charges brought against him, meets Euthyphro on his way to charge his father with murder; the murder by neglect of a laborer of Euthyphro's. This is the action to be examined, whether it is right or wrong. Socrates starts by stating the commonly accepted opinion that most people would not do this to their own family, no matter what the charge. "Is it one of your family who was killed by your father? But of course it was: for you would hardly prosecute him for murder on a stranger's behalf."¹⁵

In answer to this Euthyphro replies that there is "only one thing to consider, whether the slayer's deed was justified or not: and if it was justified, one should let him be: if not, one should prosecute him."¹⁶ By bringing this action he will discover whether his father's actions were justified or not. If they were not, he has broken the law and should be dealt with. Furthermore, if he is a murderer, the family is in danger due to the pollution associated in living with a person who has murdered, and this was what Euthyphro was trying to avoid.

For the taint of pollution extends equally to you, if with knowledge of his deed you associate with such a man and do not purify yourself and him by bringing him to justice.¹⁷

This pollution had to be purified if one was to continue in the gods' favor and hence remain safe. It was important to determine this. If the father was not found guilty, there would be no overall harm, other than the anger of the family towards Euthyphro.

I told you that it is a considerable task to learn the truth about all this in detail. But this I can say in broad outline, if a man knows how to say and to do what is acceptable to the gods, by prayer and sacrifice, that is holiness. And such conduct

¹⁵ *Eu.* 4b

¹⁶ *Eu.* 4b

¹⁷ *Eu.* 4c

brings with it safety to both private households and commonwealths: but the opposite to what is acceptable is impiety, which brings utter ruin and destruction.¹⁸

Euthyphro's justification for taking the action is that he will know clearly whether his father is guilty of murder. If he does not take this action and his father is guilty of murder, worse things can be expected to happen to him and his family as a result. By taking this action, if his father is found guilty, Euthyphro believes he is protecting and purifying himself and his family. Whether his action will actually bring this about and whether it is actually best is another point. Euthyphro believed it would, from what he had learnt or been taught, and this is where his actions have come from.

The Examination of a General Statement

There are examples in the *Euthyphro* of general statements being examined. One is that the gods should be copied, and another is that people should be punished for their crimes. For Euthyphro, it is always right to do what is religiously correct (a general statement), for although others say that it "is an unholy action for a son to prosecute his father for murder,"¹⁹ the fact is that this should be determined by the proper authorities and if the father has murdered, he should be punished (a general statement).

Euthyphro believes he is doing what is right, or pious, because Zeus did the same to his father. It was the accepted opinion that the examples of the gods should be copied. Socrates refuted this statement by using examples of the gods quarrelling over the most important of questions; what is right. If the gods disagreed, it means that what some gods regard as right, other gods regard as wrong. Which gods will Euthyphro copy? The conclusion is that a person cannot rely on copying the gods for right actions, they often do not seem to know themselves.

What proof have you that all the gods regard as unjust the death of your man - a laborer guilty of murder, who was bound by his victim's father and died from his bonds before the man who had bound him could learn from the Advisers what action he should take. What proof have you that for such a man a son should denounce and indict his father for murder? Come, try to give me some definite

¹⁸ *Eu.* 14a

¹⁹ *Eu.* 4e

proof in this case that all the gods beyond any question consider this action right:

²⁰
...

The family has two arguments against Euthyphro charging his father. The first is that the father was not responsible for the laborer's death. The second is that even if the father is guilty, the dead man was a murderer himself, and Euthyphro should not concern himself about such a creature, for it is a greater wrong (and unholy) for a son to prosecute father for murder.²¹

In answer to the first, Euthyphro wants to leave it to the religious advisers to decide on his father's guilt. His answer to the second objection is that justice must be done if his father is found guilty, this is all that needs to be considered.

How absurd of you, Socrates, to think it makes any difference whether the dead man be a relative or stranger! There is only one thing to consider, whether the slayer's deed was justified or not: and if it was justified, one should let him be: if not, one should prosecute him ...²²

To Euthyphro, to prosecute a man for murder is right, no matter who he is. The law is that "we should never give way to the impious man, no matter who he may be."²³ And piety he describes as "doing just what I am now doing. It is to prosecute the man who is guilty of acts of murder or sacrilege, or any other such offences, ..." ²⁴ Euthyphro keeps returning to the point that his father should be punished if he is guilty of murder. And even if the gods disagree over what is right and wrong, they surely agree on this. "I believe, Socrates, that all the gods would be agreed as to the propriety of punishing a murderer: there would be no difference of opinion about that."²⁵

There is no disagreement between Socrates and Euthyphro, and between the gods, that those guilty should be punished. The disagreement is over whether they are guilty or not. At this point Socrates could test the general statement of "all that is important is

²⁰ *Eu.* 9a

²¹ *Eu.* 4d

²² *Eu.* 4c

²³ *Eu.* 5e

²⁴ *Eu.* 5d

²⁵ *Eu.* 8b

whether the deed was justified or not ...”²⁶ This is what Euthyphro wants “the Religious Adviser,”²⁷ to determine.

To keep the argument moving at one point, Socrates concedes that the deed may be murder. “If you wish, let us allow that all the gods consider your father’s action wrong and all detest it.”²⁸ In this case, Euthyphro can conclude that the action he is taking has a worthwhile aim.

However, if he was to examine the specific action, he would find that his family will be harmed by the father being charged and punished while the society as a whole will benefit from not allowing murderers to get away with their fowl deeds. He would have to weigh up the consequences, but this is not done. In the *Dialog*, Socrates continues to return the focus to the idea of piety and what it is. “Suppose that Euthyphro should prove to me beyond all doubt that all the gods consider such a death unjust. I have not learnt any the more definitely from him the meaning of holiness and unholiness. This particular deed may apparently be hateful to the gods. But we have just seen that holiness and its opposite cannot be defined in this way:

The *Elenchus* - Looking for a Definition

Most obvious in the *Dialog* is the elenctic argument. Socrates states that Euthyphro must know what piety is to be able to say that his action is pious. This moves the examination away from the question of whether Euthyphro was taking the right action. Ideally, Socrates should now test whether Euthyphro can make this statement by asking him for a definition of piety. “Explain to me then just what is this actual form: then by looking to it and using it as a pattern I can accept as holy any action by yourself or another that conforms to it, and reject what does not.”²⁹ After getting Euthyphro to put forward a statement in the form of a definition: “Excellent, Euthyphro, now you have answered just as I wanted you to answer, whether your definition is true, I do not yet know: but obviously you will proceed to prove you are right.”³⁰ Socrates then follows the usual pattern of the *elenchus*.

²⁶ *Eu.* 9c

²⁷ *Eu.* 4d

²⁸ *Eu.* 9c

²⁹ *Eu.* 6e

³⁰ *Eu.* 7a

The search for the definition did not get anywhere. "Somehow or other whatever we put forward goes round in circles and refuses to stay where we put it."³¹ After several attempts by Euthyphro to give a satisfactory definition, he is ready to give up. Socrates suggests: "Let us consider then once more from the beginning what is the meaning of holiness: for I shall not willingly desert my post before I have discovered it."³² And at this point Euthyphro does give up and leaves to continue with his prosecution. Nothing had been discovered that would have persuaded him to do otherwise.

Euthyphro provides an example of how elenctically examining the definition cannot indicate whether the action is right. In all cases, this type of examination will be fruitless. It will not be able to achieve what it is meant to do - to indicate which action to take. Socrates appears to accept this when he states that even if Euthyphro can define piety, it will not help them discover if the action is the right one to take or not. There is still a need to know if the particular action is best. One specific action must be chosen and then examined to determine what results it is expected to bring about.

Conclusions of the Examinations in *Euthyphro*

From the different types of examinations in *Euthyphro*, it appears that the direct examination will indicate the wisdom of taking an action, and the examination of general statements will determine if something is worthwhile to aim at. Definitions, on the other hand, cannot be aimed at because there is no agreement on what they are; in the *Dialogs*, most are easily refuted by Socrates. This leads back to the need to examine the actions themselves.

Based on the knowledge of the method, what would have been better for Euthyphro was for Socrates to examine the action in terms of whether it would have brought about the best results. These were stated early, but passed over. Based on Euthyphro's stated expectations of the results, the action he was on his way to take appears to be the best action. He believed this before he ran into Socrates, and he still believed it after talking for a while.

The conclusion, based on the general statements that were given, appears to be that Euthyphro's aim in taking the action was worthwhile. If a person has committed a

³¹ *Eu.* 11b

crime, he should be punished. This is best for the person himself, and those around him. It appears that Euthyphro's father has committed a crime, although because of the complicated nature of it this is not certain. It is therefore necessary for the father's actions to be examined to determine if there was a crime. If there was, he should be punished accordingly. By the end of the *Dialog*, Euthyphro was still doing what appeared best. The argument was not about whether the father was guilty, but whether a citizen has the duty to charge those who break the laws and bring them to justice, and in this way contribute to the society.

After the conversation with Socrates and the *elenchus*, Euthyphro appears no closer to rationally discovering whether charging his father with murder was the right action to take or not. A satisfactory definition of piety could not be discovered. For this reason, he was not dissuaded from going ahead with his intended action. This inconclusiveness is common to many of the *Dialogs*. It could be no other way. Once an action is named, piety for example, it will be found that no acceptable definition can be found and therefore the wisdom of taking the action is impossible to discover.

Conclusion

The different types of examinations are to be found throughout the *Dialogs* and are easy to detect. When Socrates, the moral philosopher, focuses on the actual action the direct examination is found. When general statements are made, the second method is used, and when the focus is on virtue and an acceptable definition, the *elenchus* or some other method can be found. The first two methods appear to be what Socrates actually did, the *elenchus* and the other methods appear to be what Plato portrayed him doing.

³² *Eu.* 15c

Section 7: Conclusion

Summary

The purpose of this thesis was to identify and describe a method of cross-examination Socrates may have used to lead people to discovering moral wisdom; fulfilling his mission to the gods. Using statements made by Socrates of what it was he did, it appears that his method has been identified and described (providing the statements were actually made by Socrates). He examined actions directly by asking for expected consequences. He examined general statements by directly examining examples based on them, but this does not indicate if the intended action is best, only if the aim is worthwhile. By this method he was able to pragmatically demonstrate his contention that ethical issues could be resolved through the use of reason and not a reliance on the gods.

The Method Socrates used was not the *Elenchus*

The method Socrates appears to have used is different from the *elenchus*. The elenctic method cannot successfully be used to examine life by indicating which actions are right; although, it can examine the truth-value of propositions. This will not tell us conclusively whether the intended actions are right or not, only if the definitions of the virtues they appear to be based on are false or not-false. We cannot know if the definition is true, we cannot know if the virtue being examined is the correct label for the intended action, and we cannot know if the action will lead to a better life.

The elenctic method is more developed, uses complex philosophical concepts that need to be explained, or at least known by the questioner, and examines propositions and not actions. This development indicates a progression in the *Dialogs* from Socrates' method to the elenctic method, and presumably to Plato's later methods.

Conclusion

Socrates said his mission was to lead people to wisdom. He believed he could do this by examining their opinions of which actions are best and in this way help them examine life and discover how to live well. This examination is necessary because beliefs of which actions to take can only ever be opinions. The right action in one context may be

wrong in the next similar context and so people can not be sure without examining them.

Best actions are defined as those that will bring about the best results. The best actions taken as part of living will bring about the best life. However, we cannot know for sure which actions are best and so we need a method to help us discover them. The method that has been proposed as Socrates' method of direct examination of the expected consequences of an action is able to achieve this.

The method is to ask a person to truthfully state why they are taking a specific action. The person believes it is the best action; otherwise, why would they be considering taking it? Their answers are often in terms of the expected results or consequences; these are asked for, plus others that may not have been originally considered. The opinions of what consequences are expected from specific actions come mainly from experiences in the past; people have certain expectations of what they will be. They have often been right with these expectations in the past and there is no reason for them to believe any differently in the present.

By asking people to state what they believe, they put together their own argument. The outcome is that people discover the action that was originally thought to be best, is in fact going to bring about harm. Because this revelation results from their own truthful answers and the argument based on them, they end up self-convincing themselves of the conclusion. After discovering what consequences the intended action will bring, the wise person will act accordingly; taking those actions that will bring about the best results and avoiding others.

As a result of this examination two things are discovered; the first is that we do not know for sure which actions are best, and this is the beginning of wisdom, the second is that we learn whether the specific action being examined is the best one to take in the particular situation. Hopefully we also learn to examine all intended actions before taking them.

Many times in the *Dialogs*, people gave general statements instead of specific consequences in answer to Socrates' questions. These are that a particular action should

be done, or that a particular consequence should be brought about. These were examined to see if the type of action or aim of the particular action is worthwhile. However, whatever the answer, this type of examination cannot indicate which action will bring the aim about, or if a specific intended action is the best.

The beauty of Socrates' method is that it is no more than asking questions. And this is what he said he did. The examination convinces a person that a certain action based on a certain opinion will bring harm. After this he will not want to take the action. He will hopefully not be willing to continue holding the opinion that the action is right; it is not in his best interests to do so. He will reject and discard the opinion and look around for another one. A better one! And, having seen how to examine once, he will hopefully do it again for himself. Anyone can do it, Socrates said, and they can.

People might not take the action even when they discover it to be best. This is because their belief in their own opinions is stronger than the logos of the examination. To take the action that rational consideration and reflection indicates is best, is wisest. But, even once people know the results will not be in their best interests, they still take them. No one would ask someone to practice medicine on them, give a sword to a madman, or give a ship to someone who knows nothing about navigation. They would expect the worse to happen. Likewise, after the investigation with Socrates and discovering the intended action to be most likely harmful, people may still take it, it all appears to depend on how wise they are.

Discovering contradictions between what is thought to be right and discovered to lead to harm often brought about adverse reactions. People wanted to deny the conclusions that went against their original beliefs of what is best. This sometimes came about because people cannot actually give reasons why they do something, or they act differently to what they believe is right. This causes confusion, but it should not be the case. If the investigation is objective, the questioning should be perceived as neutral; a request for reasons for doing something, and nothing more. The conclusion will be valid, and it would be wise to act on it.

The method, as it has been described, appears to be a very pragmatic method of investigation. With it, Socrates could examine the lives of himself and of those he came

in contact with. He had nothing to teach, nor could he, he did not know what the other person's experiences and opinions were, so all he could do was ask questions. These questions started with the opinion a person was basing an action on and then, because we all do what we believe to be best for ourselves, led to the person trying to justify them.

There was no arguing, no trickery, Socrates could not know the answers to his questions, because he could not know what the person would say, what the person would expect the consequences to be. He also did not argue eristically, because there was nothing to argue about. He had no knowledge, nor a counter-position to push. He was not able to argue what is right and so he was discovering along with the other person whether the intended action was best in the particular situation.

For the same reason, what Socrates did cannot correctly be called refutation. He was not trying to disprove a statement or proposition. It may have seemed to those being questioned that Socrates was refuting, but this is not a function of his actual method. As long as the person states honestly what he expects to happen, that is enough. If the expected consequences are going to be harmful, it is the person who states this. He is convicted by his own opinions. Socrates is just standing on the sidelines, 'stinging and reproaching them into action.'

Change for the better

Change must have occurred as a result of lives being examined, and this appears to have been Socrates' aim. However, instead of starting at the outside and trying to stop people doing what they were doing, or trying to get them to do what they were not doing, he started at the inside - their opinions about what should and should not be done. He realized early on that we are guided by what is considered best, or more correctly, by what we believe to be best. All he had to do was find a way to help us to look at our actions and make sure what we believe to be best is in fact best, and this knowledge will guide us.

By the end of this thesis, Socrates' definition of wisdom is wider than the one he gave at his trial. It now appears to be (1) knowing that we know nothing and therefore (2) examining each action to determine if it is best or not, and then, based on this (3) acting.

The examination is part of wisdom, it is a pragmatic method that indicates best actions, and the wise person will act on the results.

Value of the Method

The method Socrates used can get results which are valuable. The method is therefore valuable. It is an easy method and can be used by anyone. All that is needed is the desire to examine ourselves by asking questions. "Why am I doing this?" "Why is this a good action?" "What will happen as a result of this action?" The consequences of this questioning are that we will come to live a better life because we will not do what will lead to disaster.

What Socrates did was, or later became, ethics or moral philosophy, but in its basic form it is a simple method that can be used to successfully determine the wisdom of taking certain actions. It appears to be nothing more than a common sense approach to living. It can be considered a method and it is successful. The method indicates to us exactly what not to do, in the same way as Socrates' inner voice told him. None of this implies the need for a philosophy or doctrine beyond what Socrates himself said - that we act in our own best interests, and that we should examine our lives by examining the actions we take. He may have had a doctrine, but he did not need one for the investigation. For this reason, all that we really need from the Earlier *Dialogs* to be able to examine our own lives is Socrates' actual method. The other parts of the *Dialogs* are interesting; identifying, describing and re-examining the arguments and conclusions are intellectually stimulating, but they are not necessary for us to discover how to live well.

Socrates' method is one way of examining ourselves, it may not be the only way, it may not even be the best way, but it seems to have been the first that has been clearly expounded. If wisdom leads us to happiness by helping us avoid mistakes, this method is one way to do it. However, we can never avoid mistakes completely. What is learned from mistakes will become part of our experience and the basis for future expectations and rational examinations.

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APPENDIX I

Generally Accepted Division of Plato's *Dialogs*¹

The most generally accepted division of the *Dialogs* is shown below. There is some discussion on whether *Gorgias* should be an Elenctic or a Transition Dialog.^{2 3}

Group One (Earlier Period)

The Elenctic *Dialogs*

Apology	Ap.
Charmides	Ch.
Crito	Cr.
Euthyphro	Eu.
Gorgias	G.
Hippias Minor	HMi.
Ion	Ion.
Laches	La.
Protagoras	Pr.
Republic I	Rep. I

Transitional *Dialogs*

Euthydemus	Eud.
Hippias Major	HMa.
Lysis	Ly.
Menexenus	Mx.
Meno	Me.

Group Two (Middle Period)

Cratylus	Cra.
Phaedo	Phd.
Symposium	Smp.
Republic II – X	Rep. II – X
Phaedrus	Phdr.
Parmenides	Prm.
Theaetetus	Tht.

Group Three (Later Period)

Timaeus	Ti.
Critias	Crit.
Sophist	Sph.
Politicus	Pltc.
Philebus	Phlb.
Laws	Lg.

¹ Found in Vlastos, G. (1991)

² Brandwood, L. (1976) *Word Index to Plato*. Leeds.

³ Vlastos, G. (1991) Ch. 2